The Sea View Cafe
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by

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Chapter One

Finn was a boy when he'd last seen Carrickbar. That would have been in the early'70s. The exact year was hazy now but what he did remember was the perfect crayon blue of sea and sky, and a sunlight painting everything in the golden tones of an eternally idealised past.

Of course winter was not the best time to be seeing the place again. Winter did not glaze over the buckled pavements, nor the cracks in white render into which the briny blackness seeped like an infection. It did not disguise at all the harshness and the unforgiving nature of life at the edge. Indeed it was to him, that afternoon, after a five hour drive, and through the murky lens of his road weariness, a cold, grey place, frozen as his heart, pale and grey as the sea before him, not the hopeful blue of boyhood dreams any more, but a cold infinity, just one more thing reflective of the lack of compassion in the world. It was a thing, he thought, that seemed to laugh at the very idea of love.

The house he'd come to rent was on Elm Street - one of the little side roads snaking up the hill. He'd not bothered to seek it out yet, and would not be doing so unless his mood improved in the next half hour. Instead he'd pulled in here by the promenade where he remembered being raised upon his father's shoulders on the evening of the last day of their holiday.

"We'll come again, Finn, eh boy? We'll come again next year?"

Finn could still hear the enthusiasm in his father's voice, something durable, heroic even, and the firm feel of those shoulders beneath him, and the certainty the man would not let him fall.

"They say you can see all the way to Ireland from here. Well, do you see it, boy?"

And Finn replied that he could see it, and that they must come again.

But they did not come; his father was gone by winter, taken by a sickness that was already eating him hollow even as Finn sat tall upon his shoulders. And it was just a myth you could see all the way to Ireland. Words were only words, and mostly empty, and on a day like this, you could see no distance at all.

So, the house would be up there then, one of the drunken little places clinging to the hill, a former fisherman's hovel, its anonymity being the

only redeeming feature, and the only thing of value to Finn now. It was a crack in the world to crawl into, a long, long way from anything that was hurting him, a long way too, from those who might know him as a coward.

The rent was suspiciously cheap, and he had an option to buy if he chose to stay beyond the winter, which he doubted. He was lucky, the agent had said; such places rarely came up, and when they did they went at once for holiday homes, only the market was depressed right now, like just about everything else. But Finn did not count this as luck, more a queer working out of the fate that had drawn him back to relive this moment from childhood, that last summer evening on the promenade at Carrickbar, the summer before his father died, and Finn's innocence with it.

It had been a more prosperous place in those days. There had been caravans on the hill, and boarding houses in the backstreets, and even the King James, seedy now, had boasted rooms for the middle classes. There had been sand castles too, down upon the beach, little flags a fluttering, and clean nuclear families with their 2.1 children in quaint summer holiday attire. But now there ran only the paint peeled line of struggling businesses - the King James Inn still in the centre, but offering no welcome now beyond warm beer and sticky carpets, no en-suite home from home, only a gaggle of hollow eyed men leaning on the doorposts, gawping over pint pots.

Then there was Salty Sams, the tourist junk emporium next door, and looking lonely out of season, insanely optimistic, still with its sun bleached kites and Frisbees in the window that looked like they might even date back as far as Finn's own summer here. Then there was Mackintyres the newsagents, and up the hill a way there was the Royal Central Bank - ATM not functioning - and the Sea View Cafe, its plastic chairs and tables thrown by the wind into a heap against the wall. And at the other end of the promenade there was Mulligans, the near ruin of a garage where they sold the most expensive petrol in England.

Sure, Carrickbar in winter looked less like a bulwark against the tide, and more something ruinous and unwholesome, washed up after storms.

He leaned back against the car and looked out at the sea, out into that infinite blankness. It spoke of hopelessness, of a lonely drowning, but he was not dead yet, so what was he to do with it? It was a question he'd been asking now since the beginning. He supposed there must be

an answer if only because he was still capable of asking the question. And maybe there was no answer, just this last small gasp of life to be lived alone somehow, at least until the money ran out.

And then what?

The Sea View Cafe looked like it was open, and a half-way decent place. He'd take coffee there, see if things felt any better on the other side of it. Sure, if Carrickbar, welcomed him in the next half hour, he'd stay. And if it didn't? Well, he'd admit his failure, go home and be exposed for the coward that he was.

Chapter Two

Hermione sees the car draw in on the promenade. It's either lost or it's some sort of official snooping about, or maybe it's to do with the properties springing up for sale all over town. Sure, that'll be it - an estate agent most likely. Strangers didn't often make their way to Carrickbar these days, except by satnav error, and the only things selling now are its cracked and crumbling properties.

From her vantage point behind the counter of the Sea View Cafe, she can make out much of the town and the promenade, and the sea of course. And it's a cold sea sort of day, the sort of day when the wind makes a mountain of the plastic chairs and tables on the front deck. They were useless things, and she would dispense with them in winter time but for the unfortunate fact she still has customers who risk their lungs with fags, and the only place for them, poor souls, even in December, is outside.

She sees the man stepping out and leaning on his car, gazing at the sea like he's remembering something, and though he's still a way off, she fancies he does not look like an official, even in his office pants and shirt and tie. It's not that Hermione has anything to worry about on that score; her hygiene certificates are in order, as are her taxes. It's just that Carrickbar in winter is the same old story, and rarely a ripple of novelty washes ashore. But here's something different; she can feel it in her bones. It's like the letter she's waited for every morning of her life, the one that would change things:

'Dear Miss Watts, you have won a million pounds.'

Or:

'Dear Miss Watts, you've never heard of me but I have been your admirer now for many years and would like to marry you. Please meet me with your answer. I will be at the,...'

Still the dream of Romance, Minnie?

Well okay, maybe not, so how about this instead: 'Here I am, the lover you've been waiting for. Come fuck me awake. Jolt me from this numbness.'

She scolds herself, but gently. The only single men around here are the old and the widowed, a pension for their income. The rest have

gone away for proper work - that being measured as anything paying even a fraction above minimum wage. There's Squinty Mulligan of course, down at the garage, his overalls smelling of old oil and fart and sweat and his eyes always drawn to her tits when he comes in. She couldn't imagine anyone wanting the likes of him, plus he must be the downhill side of Fifty. Even scrubbed up and smelling sweet, and with a whole personality transplant, Squinty still wouldn't be much of a catch.

'And you are thirty eight, Minnie.'

'Don't remind me.'

'Certainly too old to be dressing as you do.'

'Leave it, now.'

'No wonder business is so slow, you looking like that, and an oily old pervert the only man half way interested. Fashion designer indeed! What queer ideas they fed you with at school. And here you are now serving teas and frying sausages and warming pies.'

'Well, it may not be much, Mum, and not exactly what I imagined for myself, but I own this business, thank you.'

He's very still, the stranger. Unusual that. She's noticed how men like to fidget, that if you want to see casual stillness in a human being you'll find it only in a woman. It's striking, and not a little sinister. Also, he's bearded, and she's never liked bearded men. It's like covering up the goods and expecting you to buy them unseen until it's too late, and then that bearded lover you've settled on turns out to be the ugliest man alive.

And she's not that desperate.

'Be serious, Minny.' Her mother talking, again.

'Keep your feet on the ground, girl, or you'll be floating away. Fashion indeed!'

The stranger is making a move, heading along the promenade, hands in pockets, head down. There's something in the way he moves, like he's holding himself tight, bracing himself for a blow that never comes. It gives him a hunted look, as if he's in hiding from something. Is that

his story perhaps?

'Like to hide him in your bed, Minnie, beard and all?'

'Shut up, I told you. I'm not that sort of girl. Well, not any more I'm not.'

The days of bad boyfriends are long gone. Indeed the days of any kind of friend, girl or boy, it seems, are gone.

Hermione is thinking it's either the cash machine he's wanting, up at the bank, in which case he'll be disappointed, or it's the café and a brew to warm his bones on this most bitterly cold of days. She wagers on the bank, speculates he might call in on the way back if she looks clean and tidy and not too desperate. She checks her face in the mirrored chrome of the new coffee machine, the machine she's only just mastered and is yet to use in anger. For good measure, she smooths her blouse, tugs it down so it settles a little more tightly over her bosom, smooths her skirt over her hips, gives a little shimmy.

'Sure, what's not to die for, Minny?'

The door opens to the tinkle of the chimes and in walks,... Squinty Mulligan for his pies, and an eyeful of her tits.

Sigh.

She gives him what she hopes he'll take as a dangerous flash of her eyes, but it's never cautioned him before - he seems actually to like it, which is worrying. He's early today, business obviously slack. Squinty Mulligan; if anyone's capable of making her let go of her slim hanging on here, it'll be him.

"Cuppa tea," he says, then eases himself onto the barstool.

There's something in his tone today, a bit glum, she's thinking. He's hurting somewhere, which isn't like him - not like him to show it anyway, but Hermione's good at sniffing out the hurt in others, if only so she can better learn how to hide it in herself. It's his thumb. He's wrapped it in a piece of filthy tissue through which she observes a spreading blot of blood. Were it anyone else, his thumb would be up like a balloon with infection tomorrow, but most likely Squinty will survive unscathed, dirt being his natural environment.

"All right, John? What you been doin' there then?"

"Banged the fuckin' thing wiv' a 'hammer."

"Ah. Must hurt."

"Aye. Does a bit. Kiss it better?"

She might have offered him a hand-wash and a clean sticking plaster, except she's worried he'll take that as a come on, so she brews his tea instead, leaves it to stew at his elbow. She dislikes how free he is with his language, and always the innuendo, like the sleazy red top rag he buys from Mackenzies and waves about rolled up like an officer's baton. She imagines a gentleman wouldn't talk that way in front of a woman. He could be oily as he liked by day, but still a gentleman, and by night scrub up like new, but she suspects Squinty even sleeps in his overalls, and she knows for sure his superman tee shirt is into its third day now.

She gives him a frosty smile, steps back from the staleness and takes a cloth to the machine.

Many things he might be but a gentleman Squinty is not.

"Used that contraption yet?" he asks.

"Course I have," she lies.

"Waste 'o fuckin money, you ask me. Fancy thing like that in this place. Where do you think this is? Picka-fucking-dilly?"

"Well no one did ask you, John. Now, you're early for your pies, but shall I put 'em in while you wait?"

"Aye, go on."

He spills a clatter of coins onto the counter, adding a helping of grimy detritus for good measure - bits of paper, twists of tobacco, a couple of oily screws. Hermione sighs. She'll be a while cleaning that lot up, a while cleaning off the barstool too if the last time's anything to go by. Maybe he'd have turned out differently with a woman behind him, but so far as she can work out there's only Maureen from the Kings Head, and then only when she's off her head on gin of a Saturday night, and she's definitely not the keeping sort, not even for a man like Squinty Mulligan. No, his only permanent fixtures are an old dog, literally

barking mad, and a heap of rusty cars in an age when cars don't rust much any more.

The door again.

In walks the stranger.

'Eyes, Minny. Look! They're gentle.'

He turns them away, hides them from her in a blink, brushes his hair back.

'Ah,... he's a little shy. That's nice. That makes a change. A good man, Minny. And the smile,... oh, Minny, do you see the smile! It's sweetness itself.'

She squares up to him. "So," she says. "What can I get you darlin'?"

Chapter Three

Finn surveyed the scene, the improbable fresh-paint brightness, and pristine cleanliness of the interior of the Sea View Cafe, juxtaposed with the besmirched, boiler-suited clientele of one. And the woman. Surely she was dressed for higher class waitressing than a little seaside cafe: smart black skirt, pressed white linen blouse, and made up to the nines like,... what? What was she like? Did they still call that,... Goth? Short, spiked black hair, charcoal lipstick, a white powder on her face, black Panda eyes on account of the liner, and studdings in her nose and brow.

And did she just call him darling?

"Em,.."

She followed his eyes to the coffee machine. He hesitated, was drawn back to her startling looks. Her lips parted, and she gave him an encouraging smile.

"Go on," she said, a curious twinkle in her eyes, a challenge in them, he thought.

"Machine's brand new. Be adventurous. Make my day."

The boiler suited man had the look of a toad and the toad let out a non-too-stifled belch as if to deflate the woman's enthusiasm. Finn knew they were just words anyway, but before the deflating belch they'd lifted him half way to his father's shoulders again, so he could see all the way to Ireland.

'Well do you see it boy?'

"Em,..." Decision Finn. Do you stay or do you go back to the way it was? "Americano, please. Black, no sugar."

"There, now you're talking. Sit you down, darlin'. I'll bring it over."

She turned to the machine, banged the scoop, turned the handles, made steam.

Whoosh!

Finn caught the toad's eye and they exchanged a careful nod. The

toad was local, Finn was not. They were both wondering about one another. It was the territoriality of the male. That sort of thing. The toad claims ownership of the female perhaps, on account of being here first. And whatever the female thinks, he dislikes her fussing over the stranger, dislikes her calling him darling.

Finn thought about this. He liked her calling him darling, even though he knew she didn't mean it.

Curious, Finn.

He turned away, took a seat in the window and gazed out over the sea again. It was easier to watch the sea from here, in the warm, easier to slip back into the romance of it when it was not biting your ears, or spitting in your face.

Ireland!

Was he wrong? Could you see it from here on a good day? His father was Irish: County Wexford. That made Finn half Irish too. He'd discovered he could apply for citizenship, swap his red passport for the green, disappear into the emerald softness of the far away. It had made no sense to do it before, but now, with Britain voting to come out of the European Union, it was a way back in for him, should he want it, the Republic still being a full, if somewhat now impoverished member. Is that where he belonged? Was Carrickbar not far enough away from things? Must he embrace the myth of his ancestry before he could be happy?

Where did any of us belong anyway?

'Fuck's sake, Finn, you're overthinking this as usual!'

Home was where love was. And when love died, it was time to go. But you couldn't just run out on people, could you? You couldn't just run out on a life you'd spent your whole life building up from the ground!

Could you?

The woman brought his coffee, a fancy little biscuit on the side. She was trying hard, he thought, and not without appreciation, but this was still a small seaside cafe and seriously out of season; there was only so much altitude to be gained. He noted a neat little badge on her breast which said: Hermione. He noted also she wore a man's Paul

Jobin wristwatch, gold, from the pre quartz era. Finn's era. It had stopped. Beside it, a cheap plastic fashion branded thing kept up the time, all black but for the fake diamond hour markers.

"Thanks," he said, and then, impulsively: "There were caravans once."

"Sorry, darlin'?"

"Up on the hill. Caravans. I came here on holiday as a kid."

"Caravans? Before my time. What about you John? Do you remember caravans on the hill?"

Squinty had taken out his newspaper and was hiding behind it. He shrugged, grunted. Squinty remembered the caravans of course, remembered them very well, but preferred not to be drawn. Let the stranger pass on through, unenlightened, he thought.

Fucking incomer.

Finn smiled. "Well, it was a long time ago."

He could smell pies warming, wondered if he should be hungry yet, but wasn't, though it must have been twenty four hours since he'd last eaten. He took a sip of his coffee. It was good, bracingly aromatic, stimulating, but still a little hot, so he set it down while it cooled, and he turned his eyes once more to the sea. Then his phone was ringing. He fished it from his pocket and without looking at it, switched it off.

Who would that have been then? Work? He'd served his notice. They'd no call on him any more. Home? It would just be money the kids were after, or a ride into town. Or Kathleen? No, he didn't expect he'd hear from her for a while.

Squinty, folded his newspaper carefully, as if gathering courage and then in a stage whisper said: "So, I'll show you mine, if you'll show me yours?"

"What's that then, John?"

"Tattoo," he said. "What did you think I meant?" He laughed, a low, filthy laugh. "Bet you got a cute little tattoo 'bove your arse like all them other saucy little girls."

"Haven't got any tattoo, John. Not there or anywhere, thank you. Now you behave yourself and watch your tongue with me, or I'll send you on your way, and you can get your pies some place else."

Undeterred, Squinty rolled up his sleeve to display a faded crown and anchor upon a Popeyesque forearm which he now slapped upon the counter.

"Yes, John. You've shown me that before. Now just mind my clean counter will you. You're even more full of grease than usual today."

Squinty laughed, a low gravelly sort of laugh. "Oh, girly, you've no idea how dirty I can be."

"Now that's enough you old rogue. And I mean it. You can get your pies cold from Mackintyres in future."

Squinty was undaunted, laughed some more. "Less of the old, if you don't mind."

Finn kept his shoulder to the man, turned his head more squarely away. The girl's welcome had swung it, he'd thought: 'darlin' indeed! But the primate lechery of the oily man was fast eroding things. Why in decline could we not avoid settling into dirt? Sure, the guy was only joking, jesting, bantering, but his tone was low, ignorant, lewd, unwelcome.

His future still undecided, Finn paid for the coffee and walked out.

Chapter Four

"Didn't 'ave much to say for 'isself did he?" says Squinty.

"Not as much as you, John, that's for sure."

"And didn't think much of your coffee either. Left half of it. So much for your fancy machine."

"That's 'cos you got a gob on you like,... like,... I dunno,.. like a dirty old man."

"So?"

"So, not everyone wants to put up with it."

He was nice, thinks Hermione, the stranger, beard excepting, but married. She'd clocked the ring, and interpreted something in the eyes as what her mother might have called 'long married' - and now he's gone, passed on, a ship in the freezing midwinter. She watches his back as he descends the hill, still that coiled in look about him, and she wonders about his story. A real page turner she reckons, not like the long line of set asides she's known. He looked to be in his forties, too,... late forties judging by the flecks of grey. But hell, she didn't want kids, or even marriage. She just wanted to be with someone, to wake up with someone, nice and clean each morning and know they'd be there, and be tender. What was wrong with that? Was that asking too much?

'Foolish Minnie.'

'Oh, who asked you!'

She would have gazed out for longer, watched him all the way back to his car, possibly raising Squinty's suspicions and childish taunts, except just then the Ainsley kid comes hurtling down the hill on a rickety old bike that Squinty had sold him only the other day. Gorgeous looking lad, half her age, more's the pity, but not much between the ears, bless him. She'd heard he was home from his Dads, now touting his humble CV among the minimum wage slavers in town. Poor kid.

He draws level with the stranger, then his bike gives a wobble and he goes down in the road like a sack of spuds. Hermione's hand jerks up to her mouth, and she gives a startled gasp.

The stranger is momentarily stunned, then steps into the road to help the boy. But the boy isn't moving, and Hermione is out the door and trotting down the street as fast as she can in her heels. By the time she makes it, he's sitting on the kerb with his head in his hands, weeping while snowy sheets of newly minted CV spiral in the wind. At least the boy seems okay now. The stranger's hand is on his shoulder providing a silent comfort, surprised perhaps to see such uninhibited emotion. He's not embarrassed though, she notes, and she approves of that. There's a dribble of blood coming from the boy's nose and a shallow graze on his forehead. She wipes the former with a tissue, holds a fancy patterned serviette to the latter, then puts the boy's hand up to keep it there. His hands are full of gravel. She brushes it away, makes it better for him.

"Nothing broken, I don't think," says Finn. "Just the wind knocked out."

The boy's hands are swollen, cold and blue, out all day with his bag of CV's, and a bucketful of naive optimism. And now this. Hermione wants to weep with him.

Finn examines the bike. "I can probably fix it," he says. "Loose wheel nuts, that's all. I have a spanner in the car."

She looks at him, at the stranger, feels the warmth in him, nods her thanks. "I'll take him up the cafe for a brew then. Perhaps you could wheel it up when you're done?"

"Sure."

"Come on then, Kyle, darlin', come have a sit down up the cafe with me. Is your Mam around today?"

Kyle nods.

"We'll call her, eh?"

"Nah, I'll be fine. She'll only worry."

"All righty then." She thinks of Squinty, watching all of this, knows the boy's slowness is the butt of jokes, imagines the incident being embellished over beer and raucous laughter in the King James tonight. "You dry your eyes now, darlin'."

She speaks to him like a child, it comes naturally, but feels strange when he rises a full head above her. He turns, looks anxiously as Finn wheels his bike away. Hermione is quick to reassure him. "Man said he'll fix it for you."

Kyle shakes his head as if for the first time coming awake. "Don't know what happened, Hermione. Sorry."

"That old bike, that's what happened. Get it off Squinty Mulligan did you? Saw you lookin' at it the other day. He's up there now. We'll have a word with him, shall we? Get your money back. How much you pay for it?"

"No,.. no. My fault."

And Hermione's thinking it's a miracle, the way his mother is, and the stories she's heard of his dad, that between them they could have come up with such a sweet kid. "Any luck?" she asks. "I mean with the job hunting?"

He shakes his head. Shrugs. Forgives the world with a sigh.

"Bad time, winter, in a seaside town," she says. "Got to make your living in the summer, 'cos come winter all there's left is the come and go of the tide."

"Hmm? Who's that man?"

"Don't know, Kyle. Stranger, that's all, passing through. Seems nice. He'll fix your bike, like he promised. You'll see."

"Okay."

"Now, in you go. Through the back, go wash your hands and face."

And then, when the door has closed and she's alone with Squinty, she wipes the spreading smirk off his face by lowering her eyes to his: "You sold the boy that bike, didn't you?"

"Bike was fine when he rode it away."

"Death trap more like."

"You know how kids are. They break everything."

"You return his money and take that piece of scrap back."

Squinty is offended. "Deal's a deal. And the lads not short of money."

No, that was true, or at least it's what they were saying. Anything he wanted his mother would give it. But what the lad wanted was to feel like he was pulling his weight. He wanted to feel useful, wanted some face among the people here, and a job was the best kind of face.

"You took advantage."

"As if."

"Look, you give him his money back,..."

"Why should I?"

Hermione takes a deep breath. "You give him his money back, and I'll,..."

"And you'll what?"

"I'll show you my tattoo." She nods to drive home the nail and sees Squinty's eyes widen. Then the ugly blacks of them dilate in a way she's not expecting and it makes her shudder. There's a lust in him all right, and easily aroused. He needs watching, this dirty old man.

Ughh!

Kyle shambles through, dripping water from his hands, tries not to look Squinty in the eye, but Squinty touches his elbow as he passes. "Hey lad. Thirty quid weren't it? Bike wasn't ready. Hope you're not too badly shook. Wheel it back down the garage for me and we'll call it quits eh?"

Kyle looks confused, backs way from the oily tenners Squinty has just peeled from his wallet. "Stranger said he'd fix it."

Squinty gives a dismissive sneer. "He can try."

Kyle looks to Hermione, reads the nod, and takes the money. "Well,... all right then. Thanks, Mr. Mulligan."

Squinty looks to Hermione, settles his elbows on the counter. "Okey

Dokey," he says. "Divvy up. Or shall we say later round my place?"

But Hermione really doesn't have a tattoo. She'd said it on the spare of the moment, knowing it might be the one thing that would open Squinty's wallet. It worked too. Kyle had his money and some face back, but now,...

'Never were one for thinking things through, were you Minnie?'

Chapter Five

Finn was puzzled by the way the lad had gone down, puzzled by his own emotions as he'd sat there with him, at the way the shock had brought up the tears so quick in the lad. It had reminded him of a time when his own boys had needed that kind of quiet sympathy. But that was a long time ago, and though they weren't much older than Kyle, they needed very little from Finn now. Indeed, they'd grown overlarge, like cuckoos, crowding him out of his own nest. The most he got out them these days was the sneer of an all knowing arrogance that surprised and dismayed him. So, to see a boy of this age possessed of sufficient humility to weep so openly touched him deeply.

'Are neither of you going to bed? I've got work in the morning!'

'Chill out dad. It's nearly finished.'

Ah, yes, Finn recalled the nightly fencing over the noise of the TV. They'd be at it until the small hours, or until they passed out. Sometimes he'd find them still lying there of a morning as he crept about getting ready for work, not wanting to wake them, even though they'd kept him awake all night, and could now lie in, undisturbed, until mid-afternoon. He wondered if it was a natural thing, if teenagers in ancient hunter gatherer times had been used to patrol the camps all night, to watch over their sleeping elders.

'At least they get on.' Kathleen's only response.

Well it was all right for her, spending most of the week away, sleeping in good hotels, and only Finn stepping out into the dawn, half drunk with fatigue for the daily commute. But it was true, they did get on - united in their contempt of him.

Bean counter. Number cruncher. Grey old fart.

'Borrow your laptop Dad?'

'Sorry Wayne it's my work's laptop. You infect this with cyberclap and I lose my job. All right?'

'I'll be careful.'

'Wayne, you're not borrowing my laptop, all right?'

'Mean bastard.'

Was it all right for a young man to call his father a bastard? The lad would soften it with a half smile, and then following Finn's outrage there would come the one size fits all retort: *'Chill out dad, I was only joking.'*

And then, as he was walking out the door, already late and thinking ahead to the faces around the table when he presented the latest budget cuts: *'No milk, Dad.'*

'Then you shouldn't have drunk it all last night. You know where the shop is.'

'No money. Lend us a tenner?'

'You need to get a job.'

But the tenner was unfolded from the wallet anyway, like a duty, like the one honourable thing left for him to do, when all else had fallen away, to support his children, even though they were now men and needed to support themselves - no matter how modestly at first.

'They were advertising for staff there yesterday. I mean at the shop.'

'Not servin' in no fuckin' shop.'

So, out into the commute, heart already thumping,...

It puzzled Finn for a while how the nuts holding the front wheel wouldn't tighten. He had the bike round the back of the car, boot lid up where he could get at his toolbox. The wind was blowing cold now, something wet in it. He ran the nuts off and peered through them. Both threads were stripped almost clean. The only thing holding them on had been spit. It was a marvel the lad had ridden the bike anywhere at all.

They laughed at him, his kids, Kathleen too, driving around in a car with a toolbox. Just in case, he said. He'd been brought up in an era when cars broke down all the time, and a toolbox might be the difference between you getting home or having to call the patrol man out, and the difference in that was a whole lot of inconvenience. But the lads would just have called the patrol man out anyway, he supposed, or called him out to sort it out for them because there was

no pride to be had in self reliance these days, just as there was no pleasure to be had in getting things going any more. Wayne and Gavin's definition of pleasure was taking the piss out of anything that moved, including him,... that, and smoking weed of course.

Was it the weed that had been the last straw? The stink of it in his summer house, and the sneering denial? It was hard to say what had pushed him into the course he was now on.

Disgust, despair,...

Yes, it had been Carina's idea, and he would do anything Carina told him to - well, *almost* anything. But if he'd not been so desperate to get away, would he have listened to her at all?

Carina.

He needed to let Carina know he was okay.

It hadn't always been that way with the boys. They'd had the infinite promise of all youth once. Ridden bikes, skinned their knees, squealed to be pushed higher and higher on the swings. When had it ended? He supposed it was when he walked in to find them playing a video game with a cut scene showing a beastly tattooed man giving it to a woman up the arse. And they looked at him like he was intruding in his own living room, and they laughed at his reproaches like he was just a boring old man who didn't get the real world any more.

'Chill out, Dad. It's just a game.'

By chance he had a couple of nuts from those early bike days in the bottom of the toolbox. A squirt of WD 40 and they ran on to the spindle easily, and tightened up securely. The lad was in luck. The bike still wasn't up to much and it looked like the brakes were shot. He adjusted the cables, pulled them up a bit. Five minutes and the bike was serviceable. Was there no one in the world capable of doing this kind of stuff any more?

Anyway,... did he go or did he stay?

Stay where?

Carrickbar, Finn.

He'd been for going home, already wondering if the lads had expired for want of someone to heat their pot noodle, but now he'd discovered a rich vein of emotion about the place. And the woman, Hermione - the way she'd come clattering down the hill, bursting compassion at every seam - it had awed him, left him wishing it was him with the grazed forehead, and the focus of such an unsolicited and overwhelming human warmth. But that was a dangerous thing for a man in his position to be thinking.

He'd give it another half hour, see what else happened.

He bounced the bike back onto its tyres and pushed it up to the Sea View Café.

Hermione.

Interesting name.

And it was a good looking woman, made up to perfection, all be it in her own idiosyncratic way, with a face like porcelain. But she was robust, bursting at the seams with compassion, and there was that cosy warmth about her. And the lad? A bit slow maybe, but a good heart, and resilient. On the scale of welcome, the pair of them had tipped things more towards the positive. There was just the greasy old guy threatening to outbalance them. But Finn reminded himself he was not looking for people. He was looking for anonymity, and a crack to crawl into while he mended himself sufficiently to join the human race again.

He leaned the bike against one of the upturned tables, wondered briefly about uprighting the table first, but was inhibited by the eyes of Hermione which he now felt upon him through the plate glass window. Strange, he thought, the way she made him feel - a little on edge, a little embarrassed.

Stepping back inside, the warmth of the café overwhelmed him.

"All done," he said.

Kyle, sipping a hot chocolate in the corner now, looked up, frothy moustache and all, unsure what to do, or to say, as the bike was no longer his. "It's all right?" he asked. "Really?"

"No problem. Those wheel-nuts were stripped clean, and the brakes

were lethal, but it's fine now."

Hermione looked daggers at Squinty. Kyle, fanned the tenners, considered his options, concluded that he needed a bike, trusted the stranger when he said he'd fixed it, then walked over to Squinty and handed them back. "I'll keep it," he said.

Hermione let out a sigh of relief that she would no longer be baring her imaginary tattoos. Squinty pocketed the money. "Suit yourself," he growled. "But don't be changing your mind again."

"I won't," said Kyle.

Finn observed all of this and wondered what the story was. Kyle hovered awkwardly, nodded obliquely. "Thanks," he said, and offered his hand to shake.

Finn took it, pressed it once. There was definitely life in the lad, he thought, but he had his cross to bear and was stuck for a direction. "Name's Finn."

Kyle's eyes lit up. "Finn? Like with a shark?"

"Well, not exactly. Longhand it's Finbar. An Irish name. After my Grandad. Shortens to Finn."

"Okay. I'm Kyle."

"I'm off," said Squinty, having observed the long grey outline of a Volvo pulling up outside.

Hermione hadn't seen him move so fast in a while, and wasted no time in wiping the last of him away. "Can I get you another coffee, Finbar?" she asked.

"Oh,... Finn, please. Finbar's such a mouthful. Coffee, no thanks, better not. Caffeine is a habit I should be breaking."

"A hot chocolate then? On the house."

"Sounds good, but I can pay for that."

"I won't let you. Chocolate it is then."

Finn nodded, suspecting favours from Hermione were hard won and he'd do well to accept with grace. "Thank you."

He sat opposite Kyle, if only because the table was the one he'd sat at before, and Finn was the kind of creature that took comfort in habit. "Em,... so,... how's the wounds?"

Kyle took a gulp of chocolate, and didn't look too concerned with the way the day was turning out. "Oh,... I'm okay," he said.

The door-chimes tinkled and all looked up as a woman, tall and elegant walked in. Finn's eyes widened as he was hit by the full stunning force of her: fur coat, voluminous mane of blonde hair, and a face, he thought, that would have launched a thousand ships, had it not also been so haughty and severe - or perhaps they would have launched themselves all the quicker for that.

Kyle sagged. "Hi Mum."

Stiletto heels rang out on the café tiles, a slow staccato, a torpedo track to Finn's table. Hands on hips, she took him in, this man sitting with her son, then she turned to Kyle and, as if Finn was not there at all, she said: "Who is this?"

"Oh, this is Finn. He mended my bike. I fell off it. And Hermione, made us chocolate for free!"

She reached out a hand to Kyle, cupped his chin and turned his head to examine the graze. Finn had never seen a hand as beautiful - lightly tanned, delicately boned, impressive collection of gold jewels, and a jewelled Rolex wristwatch, the value of which he could have lived a whole year off. This was class, this was Lady-of the Manor stuff, except the accent was foreign. Polish perhaps? "You are good to ride this broken bicycle home?"

Kyle nodded. "It's not broken now. Mr Finn fixed it for me."

"Sure?"

"Sure, Mum."

She sighed, touched the tip of his nose with her fingers, allowed them to linger affectionately. "I see you later, then." And to Finn, as if only just acknowledging his presence. "You live around here?"

All of this Finn had watched like the unfolding of a play, the characters, the action,... and he had pondered its meaning in relation to the question he had set out to answer earlier that day. And now the players had turned round to him directly and demanded he answer, that his time was up, that he was on their stage and was he for joining in or not?

So,... did he live in Carrickbar?

What was it to be, Finn?

"Just moving in," he said. "Today. So I'm kind of new around here."

She fixed him with one imperious eye, peered slightly down her nose as if to sniff the truth in him, then graced him with a nod which he took to be as close as she would ever come to melting the frost. This was a proud woman, the like of which one rarely saw. This was ,... royalty, this was the Queen of Carrickbar. Another curt nod was proffered to Hermione. "Thank you," she said. "Both. For helping my son."

Hermione banged the scoop, turned her back, made steam, pretended business. "No bother," she said.

Finn felt the stab in her voice, the prickling of her body language as Kyle's mother slid by, regal, unperturbed.

It was as well he had not come to fall in love, he thought, or he would be stuck for choice - always assuming of course one could choose to love, or not.

Chapter Six

Stuck up bitch! Hermione takes a cloth to the chrome, wipes away the steam. And look at him, Mr Finbar, the helpless puppy, his tongue hanging out and drooling into his chocolate.

But he's staying. Living. In Carrickbar, and he's good with kids.

So what? Fuck him. Mr Fucking Finbar.

Kyle drinks up and with a shy wave to them both, carries on his way.

Hermione's face melts into affection and she waves back. "You take care now, darlin'."

"Okay."

Then he's at the counter, this Finbar - name as big a mouthful as her own. What would their Ford Escort Sun-strip shorten to? Fin and Min? She laughs out loud at that, stifles it into an unbecoming porcine snort. She's embarrassed, covers her mouth. "Sorry."

Finn is struggling not to laugh with her, something infectious about her. "Thank you, for the chocolate. Are you sure you won't let me pay?"

It's just a cup of chocolate, darlin'. It's not worth anything. She shakes her head. "So," she says. "Movin' in you said?"

"My first day," he replies. "Renting a house in Elm Street."

"Ah, heard that place was empty now. You like it?"

"Haven't seen it yet."

This is curious, she thinks, it adds volumes to his story. "Well, it's nice enough. I lived there for a bit until I got this place licked into shape. It's on the small side. But cosy. And clean."

Finn nods. She lived there too? "Well, I don't take up much room." There's a look about him as he lowers the cup to the counter. There was more in that than he'd meant to say, and he's embarrassed it slipped out. And then he spoils the mystery of it by asking: "Who was that woman?"

She bites her lip. "That? Oh, impressive, eh? That was Helena Aynslea. Lives up at the white house on top of the hill." And she's thinking, unkindly: *at least that's where her husband dumped her.* And I'm Hermione Watts, Finbar, and a better bet than Mrs Frosty Knickers for sure, except I don't like men with beards, even the those with smiling eyes and sweet, sweet smiles.

"And you're Hermione?"

"Says so on the badge, darlin'. Call me Minny if you like."

He nods. "Thank you again."

And then he's gone, and this time she's watching him all the way down the hill to his car, and wondering idly what that smell is, and realising too late it's Squinty's pies, and they're burned beyond decent - even for the likes of Squinty Mulligan. Then she's banging the counter and saying out loud: *Minny? Do I look like a Minny, you ninny?* And a little voice is reminding her: *Your dad would call you Minnie, remember?*

She draws up, thinks a moment. Yes he did. But she doesn't want a dad, she wants a man, a good man to look at her and make her feel like the woman she wants to be. And she knows it's not the done thing any more, and that a woman should just be able to be herself without the help of a man on her arm or in her bed. And anyway it's all academic as they say, and has been for years, and even if it wasn't, Finbar what's-his-name is not that man because any man who'd drool like that after a woman like Helena no-knicks isn't worth the dreaming of.

Fucking moron!

'But he was hardly drooling, Minny.' That inner voice again, the gentle voice, the voice of reason. *'He was just asking.'*

Well, who cares? It doesn't matter. I'm managing fine on my own, aren't I?

Chapter Seven

The house was a two up-two down, newly plastered and painted white throughout. It reminded him of the Sea View Café, and he wondered if Hermione had had a hand in renovating it. Strange, she'd once lived here, he thought. It also made the walls seem less cold. How to rid a place of winter grey? With an explosion of white.

There were no furnishings and only a uniform and deep blue carpeting, both up and down stairs. From the back there wasn't much of a view, other than the old buckled homesteads and their idiosyncratic demarcations. Carrickbar was ancient. The harbours of England are among the longest settled, and much of Carrickbar was still seventeenth century, though not wearing well, at least not in a pretty, touristy sort of way.

You didn't need money to live here, that was for sure. Instead you had to carry your hope like a lantern, because the place itself was lost in the dark of a half century of decline. From the upper front room, the bedroom, Finn could see the sea. There was also a smell of pine in here, and a smell of paint, and a freshness to it all that cheered him, but that it cheered him also made him want to weep. As he moved about the place, taking it in, he tried to catch the scent of Hermione. And he wondered why he would be doing that.

The first job was to order furniture - just the basics, he thought. But what were the basics of life these days? A bed? He would get a double because he was used to spreading out, with Kathleen away most of the time; also a good sized desk, and a plain chair for sitting at it, and a good lamp; then a comfortable sofa for lounging on in the day. He ordered also a large computer screen and a Bluetooth keyboard and a mouse for his laptop, to set up on the desk when the desk came. All of this was ordered through the Internet on his 'phone on the evening of the first day.

And for the first night, he slept in a bag on a pump up mattress he had taken from the garage at home - relic of a long ago camping trip with the boys.

'The boys who had now become weed-smoking men.'

'Yes, yes, all right, we've already established that.'

When his phone started ringing again in the night, this time as he was

dropping off, he removed the SIM card, and replaced it with the other he had bought on the drive up, and felt at once, as the little thing clicked into place, that he had erased himself properly to start afresh. The old SIM, he considered snapping in two, but things were not so final yet, and instead he fixed it to the back of an old business card, sealed it safe under a first class stamp. He was always careful what he threw away, like those old wheel-nuts, in case he needed it again.

The house was a surprise, curiously optimistic. He had expected something dirty and run down. What he'd got was something clean and warm. Even waking the following morning with a stiff back took none of the fresh-start sparkle away. The BT man was early, rapping on the door, and in a matter of minutes, Finn also had broadband. It was rather a modest two megabits per second, explained the man, Carrickbar being rather off the beaten track and lucky to be getting it at all, but it was more than adequate for what Finn wanted. He'd had twenty megabits at home, but that was mostly wasted on computer games and streaming crazy cat videos, his own modest needs crowded out to a snail's pace by his childrens' penchant for virtual violence and cruelty.

He'd previously calculated the money would last him a year, but living like this, carefully, he realised it might last him two. He'd not been saving the money specifically for this eventuality, more for a sizeable deposit on a Range Rover, which Kathleen had tried to convince him better befitted his station in life as a cutter of services - a tank to do battle in, to cut down the dispossessed rabble coming back at them with pitch-forks.

'I'm going away to think for a bit.'

Had he really said that to Kathlene?

'Don't be worried I might do myself in, because I won't. I need some space,... to think. That's all.'

No, he'd not said any of that, not *spoken* it. Instead he'd texted it after the text from her telling him her week in New York was being extended to two, and then to three. And she'd texted back: "What about the boys?" Not: why are you going away? Are we all right Finn? Are you all right?

Was this a thing with mothers? Were they blind to the size of their offspring? Did they look at the overweight, unshaven sloth, draped

upon the sofa, half eaten pizza on its chest, and still see the tiny bundle of flesh that had once sucked at her breast?

"I'm sure they'll manage," he'd replied.

But he'd cared little if they did or not. Was that wrong? Was that neglectful of him as a father? Or was it more his place as a father to push them out of the nest, before he could love them as men. Fly or fall. Sink or swim. And what if they would not go? What if they could not get the high powered jobs they'd been promised by the Russel Group University would be theirs for the taking? What if they'd decided the minimum wage, zero hours contract, unskilled economy was beneath them? What did that make him, that he had gone to seek his space elsewhere?

Of course he had not told Kathleen how long he would be away, nor that he had arranged the lease on a house three hundred miles from his home in Aylesbury, quit his job and gone up north. That would be for later. Things were such a mess, he could only deal with them one small drip at a time.

Space.

Strange how he'd ended up with no space. There was a four bedroomed house, a big living room, in which the TV was always on, driving him out with its puerile nonsense. Then there was a kitchen, made a permanent tip from the constant snacking of the boys from mid afternoon, when they rose, to the small hours of the morning. That left him the bedroom, or the little wooden summer house in which he suspected they were smoking weed. And by the time he was coming home some nights, Kathleen was thinking of bed anyway, at least on those days she was home at all, and by then the boys had the living room festooned with the wires of their game-stations and the rat a tat tat of wargaming, or the effing and blinding of simulated urban grunge, or the grunts of muscle-men giving it to women up the arse,....

Well, sometimes that's just how it goes, Finn.

And the boys were not boys at all, but men of twenty five and twenty six, with degrees in business-speak and no jobs, and the minimum wage in the corner shop was beneath them so they would not entertain it, and can you lend me fifty quid Dad so I can go clubbing? So he would give them the money, thinking they would like him for it, think him generous, kind, and a good father.

They did not.

They did not think of him at all.

And he would only give himself a heart attack berating them. Again.

"You must let it all go," said Carina.

Carina?

Who was she?

Carina was the senior psychiatrist he'd unexpectedly befriended at the hospital. Or was it she who had befriended him? He couldn't remember now.

"Learn to meditate. Exercise more. Or it will kill you."

He'd talked to her about the headaches, about the dizziness, about the sickness he would feel of a morning before coming in to work. To his surprise, she'd not advised him to see his GP, had told him straight it was a waste of time, that the journey from the GP to her consulting room was such a rocky road, few ever made it. And Finn knew that, because he was the one handing her the budget each year that said: less, less, less.

And Kathleen had not let him touch her in a decade, which he'd also told Carina. And when he masturbated now even the most frantic jerking could yield no more than a dribble, which he had not told Carina for the shame of it. But altogether, he no longer felt the same, even about the women he dreamed of, including Carina who was every man's ideal muse: good looking, empathic, wise and sexual.

But maybe the asexual life would suit him better, the life of a monk.

Maybe he'd have no choice.

If he could only find the space.

To think about all of this.

Hermione frowned as Finn ordered the full English. Again. "You won't be making a habit of this will you, Finbar?"

"Eh?"

"Bad for you, every day."

She was dressed much the same he noted, except this time the blouse came down over a pair of black leggings, but the porcelain make-up and the black paint was as yesterday, also the Paul Jobin wristwatch, this time looped around her belt. The brow piercings had gone, and the nose stud was smaller, drawing attention to the otherwise perfect picture of her face.

"I do need to be careful." he smiled, a little defensively.

She was such a pretty woman, this Hermione, and alarmingly open. He could not allow her to get too close in case she turned out to be the sort who did not need to be asked, the sort who, like Carina, did the asking, did the talking, the telling, the taking. There were women like that, he thought. Sure, Carina was like that and he still felt a fool refusing her invitation to stay over that time. But he was not looking for an affair. It was just that his loneliness, hundreds of miles away from home, rendered him vulnerable to one.

He needed to be careful.

"How's the house?" she asked.

"Oh, great, thanks. Small, like you said, but plenty of room for me. Plenty of,... space. You used to live there?"

She gave him a nod, appearing to see right through him, to read his story as if it were written on his forehead, so he removed it with a nervous wipe of his fingers. And over the sizzle of the sausages, she said: "Thanks for helping out yesterday."

"Yesterday?"

"With Kyle. He's a good lad. Tries hard, but people can be a bit,... cruel about his,... you know?... his ways."

"His ways?"

"Yea,... you know,... his being a bit,... slow,.. like,..."

Sure, in olden times Kyle might have been described as a bit slow. Now there was probably a medical term, but Kyle wasn't ill. He looked about what? Eighteen, but would probably always be a slightly backward fourteen year old, which was unfortunate in a society where you needed a degree even to cross the road. Again, in olden times there would have been a place for him, helping out in some way that needed muscle or a dexterous pair of hands, and he might have been happy, found a good woman to love him, bounced babies on his knees. The only thing going for Kyle now, however, was his mother looked well off, so the boy would most likely never want for anything.

Except for what mattered most to him.

His full English arrived with a Yellow Mr Smiley Napkin, and a waft of perfume. The egg was perfect, he thought, all of it perfect, as pristinely presented as she was herself.

"So, what do you do?" she asked. "Tell me if I'm being nosey."

"Em,.. do?"

"Job."

"Oh,... I'm sort of between jobs at the moment. Living on my savings for a bit."

"Must have been a good job if you could afford to save. I struggle to save anything at all these days."

Was it a good job? He thought about that. It had started out all right. It had started out feeling like he was freeing up the doctors and nurses to do what they were best at, while he and thousands of others like him took over the paperwork, and the money, and the management of things. Except management, he discovered was a self sustaining phenomenon, and grew like a fungus into places where it was neither wanted or needed.

"The money was okay," he said.

His hand was shaking, just a tremor, and there was a sheen of sweat now on his brow and little beads of it prickling through his hair. He put his hand in his pocket, as if searching for something, hoped the sweat would evaporate quickly, hoped she hadn't noticed any of this. Was it the job, or the fact he'd not actually told anyone but Carina he'd

handed in his notice? Or was it that he might have left Kathleen with the impression he'd be away only a few weeks, when it was looking more like a couple of years, that in fact,...

He had left her.

He had run away from home.

No, he'd not actually told anyone any of this, except Carina.

Chapter Eight

Leave him be, she's thinking. Don't let him think you're a nosy cow wanting to know his business. But there's a million questions she could ask, and a million more all the novelty-starved denizens of Carrickbar will be wanting answering too, and will be asking her when they know he comes in here. But she's seen the tremor, the sweat-sheen on his brow, and knows a bit more of his story now and it's none of their damned business, or hers.

Well, maybe it's her business. Because she's different. All right?

But where's his wife? Does he have kids? And what's this well paying job he's given up to come and live on the edge of the Irish Sea, by the salt marsh and the mud flats, and the litter strewn beach?

"Can I get you a coffee, Finbar?"

"Americano please. Black. Thank you."

"And no sugar?"

He smiles. "That's right."

Sure, he's probably a heart attack waiting to happen. Not a good bet, Hermione. And married, remember. Married, and bearded, but the beard is beginning to look okay on him. It's just the married bit that's the problem, or not really a problem, since all of this is fantasy, like the way every half decent looking man is fantasy these days. And she doesn't want a man, for what good is a man? They're unclean creatures and expect strange things from women, while giving nothing in return.

Sure, who needs a man like that?

But he's vulnerable, and kind, a bit like Kyle in a way - except he's somehow bluffed himself into a high powered place, only for it all to come tumbling down years later.

Job, wife, kids.

The lot.

That's his story, Hermione.

Wow!

"I'll bring it right over," she says.

And she's hoping it'll be a habit, him coming in of a morning like this for his breakfast, then she can get to know the ins and out of him a little more without him knowing she's knowing him of course. But is he interested in a woman? Well, maybe not in one like her. Wrong social and income bracket for sure. But she could still recall the look of him with Helena yesterday, standing there all proud and tall in her fur coat and no knickers, and her blonde hair fluffed out and that frosty face, like she was,... f,.. fu,... fucking royalty or something.

Sure, by the look of him then, he wasn't beyond persuading.

She brings his coffee, sets it down. He's already finished his breakfast like he was ravenous, and she wants to ask if he'd like an extra sausage, like he's a dog or something - she has this feeling he needs feeding up, looking after, and it's the only way she can nurture him. And then, as she's turning away he's asking: "Kyles mother?"

Oh, there we go! So what is it? You want the name and address of that shameless tart with the blonde hair? Not likely, matey. Go get it yourself, and if you ask me you'll stay well clear of a woman like that, though men can't help it, can they? especially those who think they're a bit above themselves. Are you above yourself Finbar? And what kind of name is that anyway? Stupid name. I can heal you, darlin'. Clean you up. She'll make you iller than you already are, and messy as hell.

She turns, her face innocence itself. "Hmm?"

"Kyles' mother, Helena. She's Polish?"

Sigh of resignation. "No, I heard she's Russian."

"Russian?"

"Story is she married a guy from London, a trader, ruined himself in that big crash at the end of the eighties. 'Bout the same time as she's coming out a newly collapsed USSR with nothing but the clothes on her back. They meet, both think they're marrying money because they're both braggers in that way, and scrub up well, but it turns out they've not a bean between 'em - only they both realise it too late,

see? I mean after they're married. So he dumps her up in that big, lonely old place, edge of nowhere, then goes back to London and makes his fortune all over again. They say he won't divorce her 'cos then she'll get half his money."

She smiles. Has she said too much?

"Things must,... suit her though," says Finn, somewhat taken aback by this sudden flood of information. "Or she'd be suing for divorce anyway."

Hmm. Not thought of that angle, Finbar, but you're right. Perceptive, aren't you? I'd better be careful. "Suppose so. Kyle's everything to her. And she doesn't seem to want for anything. Fancy her then, do you?"

She has to ask, though she pitches the tease nicely, just the sunny side of insolence, and he laughs. But her mouth's already run on for too long, and indiscreetly at that, with the half hearsay story of Helena Aynsley's life. So let him blush and wriggle his way out of that one, Mr Finbar What's-his-name.

"Em,... well, I doubt a woman like that would have much use for a guy like me."

Oh? Interesting comeback, Minnie - just the right side of self deprecating to avoid it sounding pathetic. "I dunno. You're not so bad looking, Finn. 'Bout her age too."

Be even better looking if you got rid of that beard though, darlin'.

"Well, thanks for the suggestion. And the compliment. If she and I both weren't already married, and she didn't have a look on her that would chill molten lava, I might bear that in mind."

Note confirmation of marriage, Hermione.

And the fact he's not looking for an affair.

And the fact he finds Helena's frosty demeanour intimidating.

Which makes both of them.

But then, men always say things like that, don't they? Until the lights go down and then it's hands in your pants and sucking your face off, and

it's the married men who are the worst, all of them after a quick shag to break the monotony, and no strings, and know your place, Hermione.

Know your place.

Yes.

Well, fuck 'em. And fuck him, Mr Finbar what's-his-name, standin' there with the hots for that fancy pants of a tart already, her with the big blonde hair and the fry-your-balls face. Or is it freeze your balls? Freeze or fry? Which is it?

Or more to the point: is he on something for his anxiety? Or is he just muddling through like the rest of us, and worn out by this endless free-fall into oblivion?

"Have you,... been here long?" he asks.

Oh? Interest in me now is it? Well, thank you. Very charmed I'm sure.

She manages a serene look, a little flutter of her lashes. "A couple of years."

"And you own this place?"

"All bought and paid for by my Aunty Emily's life savings, God bless her. " *Too much information, Minny. Reel it in a bit*. "Business and home, all in one."

There, he knows where you live now. Would you like to come upstairs and see my duvet, Finbar?

"So, is business okay here?"

"Well, as you can see we struggle in winter. But we didn't have such a bad summer. The place needs to do better though, I mean Carrickbar. It's not such an unattractive town when the sun's shining, and it's not a bad stretch of beach if you can forgive all the crap that gets washed up on it these days."

"I know. I remember coming here as a child. We stayed in a caravan. I remember it fondly."

"Is that why you came back?" *Ooh, careful now, Minny, or he'll know*

you're onto him.

"Hard to say," he replies.

Meaning: it's the last place on earth anyone else would think of looking for him.

This man's on the run from a train wreck.

Now there's interesting!

Chapter Nine

Finn's settling in began with Ebay and a broken Roamer Anfibio circa 1967. It was a plain, gold plated men's dress watch, not running, for which he'd bid £22.50 and won. The postman brought it during his second week in the house, after the furniture had arrived. He laid it on the desk under the all revealing glare of the lamp. It was already fully wound, but not ticking. A gentle shake released a tentative flutter from the mechanism, and the second hand made unsteady progress for a moment, before stopping. The balance was fine then, which was the main thing. If the balance had been broken, the watch would not have responded at all, and it would have been beyond him to repair it.

So,.. he'd strip it and clean it - this usually did the trick - and if that worked he'd fit a new crystal, because the old one looked like someone had taken an angle grinder to it. The gold plating on the case was in good nick, and the whole of it would freshen up like new. And then? He'd set the Omega aside for a while, wear the Roamer for a bit, before selling it on.

Watches, for all of their apparent complexity were easy to fix, generally requiring nothing more than a clean and an a drop of oil. It just took a bit of patience and a steady hand. It was beyond him to repair human beings though, the way Carina did - a thing he admired in her, but he'd found in himself an affinity for mechanical things, and took pleasure at least in fixing them.

Selling the Roamer was the plan anyway, putting it back into the world, to function for perhaps as long as it already had. But more likely he'd put it in his box of keepers.

The box, an old tin of Quality Street, already contained thirty seven watches, with the Anfibio making thirty eight. They were all safe in a fold of bubble-wrap, neatly stacked, all Swiss, all plain gold-plated gents dress watches: Roamers, Rotarys, Tressas, Paul Jobins, Avias, Tissots, Rhones. He'd take them out occasionally and wander through them, wandering as he did so through the times each one brought to mind, memories going back twenty five years, to the time before children, to a time when he had seemed brighter, happier, healthier, wealthier.

The collection wasn't worth much, all mid priced tickers in their heyday, none of them solid gold or anything - just the cheaper, plated hand-winders of the mid twentieth century. Working men's Sunday watches.

Only the watch he wore day to day - the Omega, was worth anything significant, and certainly a lot more than he'd told Kathleen he'd paid for it.

She was neither fond, nor understanding of his hobby since, for her, the value of a thing was more in its appearance than its substance. Appearance is where the money was made, she said. Substance is what drained budgets. To her, one watch looked pretty much like any other. Why pay hundreds for an old wind up, when you could get a new one, more fashionable for twenty quid? As for tinkering with the things until gone midnight, had he no work he could bring home? No wonder he was stuck in middle management, going nowhere.

Where was his ambition?

Had she married beneath her?

The latter points she did not raise to his face, but rather it was implied in the other things she said. She was doing well now, a directorship and a near six figure salary, and all the work and travel that came with it, which she complained about endlessly, but was simultaneously energised by it, and immensely proud of the Mercedes, paid for by the company executive car scheme.

Another box contained the watches Finn had been unable to revive, and which provided the spare bits he sometimes used to get the others going. The thing with a watch, when it becomes unreliable is people give up on it, and professional help is too expensive for the poorer brands, so they're thrown away because newer watches are so cheap, and fashion so fickle. The same thing happens to people.

Finn preferred watch repair to meditation. It was Carina who had brought up the subject of meditation, Yoga too, but had told him to stick with the watch-mending - whatever took him away from himself for an hour or two of an evening.

Finn needed no persuading.

The thing with most hobbies is they took up a lot of room, but Finn's fitted neatly into a single case, and he'd been careful to bring it with him - watches, spares, and full toolset. It also lent the illusion of industry when what in fact he was doing was nothing - at least nothing that made sense financially. Strange, he thought, how what had made sense financially for most of his life had amounted to nothing either,

nothing tangible at least, and for many who'd had the misfortune to encounter him, professionally, it had amounted to a good deal less than what they'd had before.

It took him an hour to lay the Roamer carefully bare, the movement revealing itself in all its intricate glory. He put the bits that needed cleaning into his little ultrasonic bath, and set it going. And while the parts fizzed, he ordered the new crystal and a tan coloured Camel-Grain strap over the Internet. He wondered about selling it again, like he always did at this stage - the lure of finance, the principle of profit - but he reckoned he'd make about a tenner less on it than what he'd paid if you added in the spares, so as a potential business venture it was not promising. Instead he looked forward to the pleasure of wearing it for a while.

Some things in human affairs defied calculation.

Some of his collection had appreciated over the years, and might be worth going up for auction, but these were pocket-money profits, and no way to make a living, though he had thought about it. Indeed, he'd wondered about setting up in the simpler kinds of watch repair, except nobody got their watches fixed these days, unless it was a Cartier or a Rolex. They threw them away and bought another. So, he had a year or two before the Range Rover money ran out. What was the point then in settling into life in Carrickbar? Why wait to face the music, that his marriage was over, that he had allowed himself to be displaced from his own home by the ego of others, and the corroding sense of his own uselessness?

It was the pending ultimatum that worried him.

Either the boys move out, or I do.

Was it really that simple? Or was it that he had no love left for Kathleen, and was too cowardly to tell her so?

He had never been one for ultimatums. And the whole thing was ridiculous anyway. Kids moved on. Usually, they wanted to, indeed were impelled to do so by some in-built instinct. They did not settle in, like his, eventually to swell to unmanageable proportions, sucking the life out of him.

But what if it all backfired and the world called his bluff?

He remembered the way Helena Aynslea had doted on her son. By any standard, even with expensive degrees, his own kids had turned out to be bigger half-wits than Kyle. Kyle had not the brains, but he had the spirit, while Finn's own boys had the brains, but lacked just about everything else. He thought back to Kyle, crashing to the road off his busted bike, and a cloud of useless CV's, pleas for minimum wage dead end work, all up in the air. Why did he feel he could help Kyle, when he could not help his own?

Kathleen would not be pushed to push them out, push them to sink or swim. It would be Finn moving on. So, yes, it was a cowardly thing, this thing he was doing, the abdication of responsibility, the probability of divorce, the decimation of his pension, of himself, and all he'd bought himself in exchange was a few years of space in which to see it coming.

Growing tired and not a little depressed, he set the watch aside. Tomorrow would be soon enough to begin assembling it back together. And there was no rush. He checked his email - not the official BT mail of Finbar Finucane, but the lesser known mail of fin.finucane.65@gmail.com. There were no messages and only Carina, knew that mail address anyway. Carina, the only woman he'd been able to talk to in a decade.

He had thought all the psychologists and psychiatrists would be squeaky clean in the department of the mind, but they were as dishevelled as anyone. Indeed, some were as mad as the people they treated. Perhaps they needed to be. They also needed to be aloof, he guessed. Sure, Carina was the only evidence he had to go on, but she was as aloof as they came.

"It's not your fault, Finn. You have a job to do," she'd told him - this in the aftermath of one of the dreadful monthly budgetary reviews, Carina lingering in the corridor to pass on the gentler vibes of her magnanimity, while others had seethed and wished him dead.

"It's kind of you to see it that way, Carina. But how many suicides this week?"

"It doesn't matter. It's not relevant. You have your job to do, otherwise you'd get fired."

"If we'd more money, more doctors, would it make a difference? Or would they kill themselves anyway?"

Finn wanted to know, wanted to understand how things worked beyond the spreadsheet and what his place was in all of that. But too much self awareness in human affairs is not always a good thing.

It was Carina who had recognised his descent into neurosis, his incompatibility for the task in hand, she who had quietly diagnosed anxiety and, more lately, the depression. Any day she had expected news that the penny pinching bastard Finn Finucane was off sick.

Or dead.

"This job will kill you Finn. It's not right for you."

Some people, she said, and by that she meant the right people for Finn's job, developed thicker skins as they got older. With others, like Finn, all that happened was their skins wore out and the holes began to show, and they fell through the holes into the abyss of mental illness.

She was a small woman, Carina, hair the colour of rusty straw, and a warbling voice as if on the verge of a nervous breakdown herself. But there was a toughness too. There were suicides every week, and they were about the only thing that took the pressure off her books, because the successful interventions were so few these days and overwhelmed anyway by the incoming tide of fresh referrals. And there was very little she had not seen by now. It was like the whole world was going mad. But when everyone was mad, how did one measure normal?

"I prefer you with a beating heart Finn. That way I can still treat you as human being and smile when I think of you. Don't make me have to put you in that box of dead people I could not help any more."

"I can't just leave my job."

"Why not?"

"I just can't. And I can't blame the job when things at home are no less,... difficult."

"Slept in the summer house again? But Finn it's too cold now for that. You'll be ill. Can't you just tell your children to be quiet of a night? Or better still tell them to fuck off and find a job. Or better than that, why

don't you come sleep at my place for a bit, I mean when Kathleen's off on her travels. Who would know?"

"What?"

"I don't mean like *that*,... well, you know you can if you want to - goodness knows we could both do with a good shagging. But more than that, a man needs his sleep, especially if he's working twelve hour days and the whole of the medically trained staff think he's a bean counting waste of space, single handedly running the health service into the ground."

Finn groans.

"I'm joking Finn. No one's that's stupid. We all know the way it is. There are others who worry about you too."

"They don't take me seriously."

"Who, the kids?"

"I'm too soft with them, I know. I just wanted them to,..."

"Like you? Children are primitive. Teenage boys will push to gain advantage, and keep pushing until they meet resistance. Finn, you are like smoke. You are like me. You disperse at the faintest hint of conflict."

"They are not teenaged boys any more, Carina. They're men, in their twenties, with no more idea of the world than they had when they were ten."

"What does Kathleen say?"

"She doesn't notice it the same, not being at home much now."

They were sitting in the bar of the Four Feathers. Finn had no idea how this had come about - almost a subliminal thing on both their parts - and since there was no sex involved, neither saw the harm, and both were too wearied after work, and Finn after hardly any sleep, to care about appearances any more. If someone had seen them, and spread the news to Kathleen, he would have been glad to admit to an affair, even though none existed. Maybe sometimes you couldn't mend a thing until it was properly broken.

"Get out of there Finn. Find shelter, go lick your wounds."

"Wouldn't it be easier to just to ask Kathleen about a divorce?"

He was joking. He had no intention of divorcing anyone. Carina was right about him being like smoke. It would all be okay. The lads would see sense, get themselves into any kind of work they could find, fly the nest, make them proud, then he and Kathleen would have the chance to get back on the course they'd somehow lost twenty years ago, a time when they had simply wanted to be together.

"Have you any idea how stressful divorce is for a man your age? No Finn, the odds are overwhelmingly against your surviving it. You must simply take refuge for a bit."

"But how would I live? No job? No home?"

Carina lifted an eyebrow, finished her drink. "I don't know. It won't be easy. Between you, you and Kathleen must bring home a lot of money. Enough to keep your kids in computer games, pot noodle and weed for ever. But do you call it living? I give you another five years at most."

"Five years?"

She nodded, then counted off his options on her fingers: "Heart attack. Stroke. Suicide. Nervous Breakdown. Or Run. Take your pick. Trust me, I'm a doctor."

"But,... what about you? You work in that place too, the full spectrum of human frailty. How can it not affect you?"

"My skin is thick. There is nothing I have not seen and cannot survive. Yours is paper thin, it tears easily. Which is why I love you. So, go. But keep in touch, then I know you're not just one more statistic lost to us for ever."

Chapter Ten

Grey sand, grey sea, grey sky, and only a fraction of tone between them, each smeared into the other by a soft morning mist the outgoing tide has pulled down from the moors. Hermione has rolled from bed in the predawn, pulled on the grey jogging bottoms, wrestled herself into the sports bra, over which she's yanked the hooded top with the faded University of Exeter lettering. The sand is flat and wet, giving like putty under her trainers as she jogs.

She's already climbed the hill, up past the bank, ATM still not functioning. She's climbed out of town to the path by the old house where Helena "no nicks" hides, then it's down the skittery cliff-side path, and finally she's returning along the beach, to the harbour. Four miles, every morning, except for the mornings she can't be bothered. Which is most of them.

The wind is cold on her cheeks, her eyes bleeding tears which she wipes on the backs of her sleeves and in which her hands shelter from the stinging air. It's an hour before opening. Time then to shower and perfect her mask. It's pension day so she may be lucky and get a few of the old folk in, blowing a bit of their weekly windfall on tea and cake, or maybe even lunch. She can see the cafe coming up now, rising above the harbour, the back of it looking like the white render needs tidying, painting fresh come spring. Always something to take the satisfaction out of it, she's thinking.

From the cafe, there runs a good sized bit of land down to the sea wall she's not made use of yet. There were tables there in times gone by, pretty parasols like exotic flowers to brighten an otherwise dour seafront - just weed and rubbish now, and rotting tables long truined by wind and winter storms, and not the trade to make it worth the while clearing it all up and starting anew. But it's untidy. And Hermione does not like "untidy".

There's a container ship on the horizon, suspended, floating in mid grey. She wonders if they can see her, those salty men with their crown and anchor tattoos, through their binoculars. Or is it all white shirts and computers and swivel backed chairs on ships these days, same as everywhere else? She side-skips, one way, then the other, pulls a cartwheel, squeals into the silence and waves to her imaginary audience, wipes her sandy hands on her bottom, and trots on.

It's another cold sea sort of day, but she's warming to it.

It's a good bit of beach just here, decent sands for kiddies and sand-pies, washed clean each day by the tide, though she's a good mind to go along it with a bag now and then to pick up the stuff the tide also vomits up.

And there's a man.

She sees him a little further out, just standing there, like he's waiting for the sun to come up. But he'll wait a long time because he's looking west, into a place of amber sunsets, into the place of long ago.

Finn!

She fights back an unexpected twist of pique at recognising him. The beach is hers at this time of the day. It's not for sharing. Why come here to hide, strange, lonely man. There's something in her heart too, and it confuses her. Its not compassion, more a fear, because the mess of Finn is something not to be cleared up by a lick of white paint and a tin of Brasso.

'Mess?'

'Yes, the mess of him, Hermione.'

'Well he's nothing to do with me.'

He's married, hiding, and anyway he has the hots for Helena no-knicks - her with the sexy foreign voice and the elegant ways, and the adorable son, and all of this is pettiness and stupidity, as was your lying there last night with the humming of Mr Hardy between your legs and your hips rising to meet the weight of that fantasy love.

'And whose face did he have? Bearded.'

'That's nothing to do with anything.'

'And the whole point of Mr Hardy, as you know, is he does his job, and is always gone in the morning, having asked nor expected anything in return.'

That's it with men, they must be tidied up all the time, while Mr Hardy can be so easily tidied 'away' instead.

Thank God for Mr Hardy!

She takes the steps up the harbour wall two at a time, but softly, in case he hears. She feels his eyes on her back as she climbs, though when she reaches the top and turns, he's still staring out to sea like he hasn't seen her at all. And she's piqued by that as well. So, let him go somewhere else for his breakfast, or cook his own this morning, the useless lump of a man.

And here's Mulligans Garage, and that big brown mutt barking and jerking at its chain like it would have her leg off, and Squinty opening up shop like he's anything worthwhile to do. The grimed window above him is obscured by a faded flag, the red and white banner of Saint George. She has yet to decide if this is a left over from the last European Cup, or if Squinty is some form of petty nationalist. And there he is, staring through the grimed glass of his office while no doubt thinking all the while *'your arse would look better in Lycra, girly, and I wouldn't mind a piece of it.'*

Which is why I wear what I wear, you old scrufbag, because I'm saving my arse for better times than these. Except I might be dead of old age by then and my arse all crinkly, so any port in a storm.

Except not.

Not Squinty Mulligan.

Deffo.

Peuwwwk!

He waves. She responds, half smiles, thinks: "Fuck off, Squinty."

As she thumps up the side-stairs to the flat, the thought of that messy old yard is gnawing at her. She could make it into a little tea garden perhaps? Nothing flashy. Strawberries and ice-cream? Get all that rubbish shifted, spread some decorative gravel on it, some nice tables for when the better weather comes - just a few to start, see how it goes?

Could the kitchen cope with all of that? This isn't exactly a big place, Minnie. Maybe that's why it's always struggled. Maybe it would be like the coffee machine - overly expensive and under-used.

So,.. fresh pants, skirt today, white blouse - the better feely one. She finds Mr Hardy hiding under the pillow as she straightens the Duvet, puts him in the drawer where he belongs, until next time. Facepaint. Dab of perfume, the name of which reminds her of the writer of all those books she's fond of.

'The nuerotic ones, Minnie?'

'No, the e,..rotic ones, stupid. Anais-Nin. And what's wrong with that? No one really understands the erotic any more.'

All they want is sex.

Eight twenty five. Sign turned from closed to open. Business as usual. Prompt as usual even though no one notices or really cares. Except her. Fingerprint on the coffee machine, wiped clean with a light fog of breath and kitchen cloth. Check her face in the chrome while she's at it.

Control. Control.

Sure, what's there to lose?

Finbar is coming up the steps by the harbour wall, turning up the hill, tips his head to Squinty, is rebuffed by the shaggy hound's growl. He's coming to her, settling in like clockwork. A routine kind of man is Finbar. But there's no way she's serving him a full English breakfast again, for that would make it every morning this week. He'll be putting on weight, and waking up dead of a heart attack, and all her fault.

Scrambled eggs for him today, and tea.

And definitely no Mr Americano.

But of course he'll have what he wants, unless she lies and says the machine's broken and the griddle too, and that's hardly professional, Minnie.

"Ah, mornin', Finbar. And how are you today?"

Chapter Eleven

Finn was cold, not moving fast enough to stop the wind from biting. There'd been a girl on the beach, running. He'd only seen her in the distance and then from the corner of his eye, wondered who she might be, felt inadequate with his sedentary ways, felt a twinge in his knee even as he'd then turned to walk the tide line.

"Oh, I'm okay, thank you, Hermione."

He noticed she'd dropped the "darlin'" and was sorry for it. He couldn't remember anyone ever calling him that before. Darlin'. Of course Hermione called all her customers darlin' when she didn't know them, but quickly learned their names, and remembered them. He admired that too, admired the way she was not like him, that she wanted to know people, that she could easily gush a genuine and completely disarming sympathy at the slightest provocation. Him? He'd spent his entire life avoiding names, avoiding people, running scared in case they found him out, that he was afraid to say: '*I'm frightened, please help me.'*

"So, what can I get you?"

"Em,..."

He couldn't decide, hadn't really thought about it, though by now he knew the menu of the Sea View Cafe by heart, and it wasn't complicated.

"How about a poached egg on toast," she said, "And a nice big mug of tea?"

"Yes,... that'll be great, thank you."

"Good man."

Compliant he was. She could most likely make something out of him.

'What was that, Minnie?'

'Nothin'. I didn't say nothin'.'

Finn moved to the same table as always. Sat, stared out at the sea, another cold sea sort of day, unconsciously winding the Roamer as he

did so, then caught himself lost in the sweep of the seconds hand. It had cleaned up nicely, and the service had it ticking well now. Three hundred point oh six beats per second, according to his little machine, or about ten seconds fast per day, which meant, near as makes no difference, it was good as new, and a lovely thing to be saved from the scrapper.

He'd been chasing a Bernex on the Bay last night, but a couple of other watchers had bid it up to well beyond what it was worth, and Finn knew his limits. Still, there was a nice looking Tissot coming up in a few days that looked like going for much less. Thus was his life rescued by eBay.

She was wearing the Paul Jobin again, right wrist, another ditzy glitzy fashion thing on her left. He meant to ask her about the Jobin, but it was clearly personal and Finn wasn't good with 'personal'.

She brought his poached egg, his cup of tea, set them down, then set herself down in front of him, pulling out the chair with a squeal upon the tiles, and she dropped into it with a sigh like she had something on her mind.

He looked up, startled, staring right into those panda eyes, the pale face, the delicately painted lips. She was so achingly beautiful, he thought, and always something of the tease about her, which lent her great charm, though of course she also made him terribly nervous.

"Will you help me?" she asked.

"Em,..." Finn felt at once inadequate and afraid. Help? How could he help anyone with anything? He'd most likely screw it up, make a mistake, get the figures wrong, get defeated in an argument, lose face, lose credibility.

"I want to hire one of them big builders skips," she said. "I want to clear out the side patio. It's a horrible mess. I just need some men to do the clearing for me. Are you in?"

Finn was taken aback by such a simple request. Yes, he could probably help out with that without screwing it up. He felt a rush of enthusiasm at the idea. "Em,... yes, of course."

"I'll pay you. Only you told me you weren't working right now, and all the other people I can think of round here are either too old or bone

idle."

Finn didn't want her money. Financially, she was barely hanging on here, whatever she told him. "No need to pay me anything. I'll be glad to help. How about asking Kyle too?"

"Kyle? Yes - good idea! Only I've not seen him around for a while."

"I can ask up at the house if you like."

No, she didn't want Finn calling at Helena's house, perhaps being invited in, perhaps being seduced on the spot. Sure most likely Helena could make something out of him as well,... "S'all right," she said. "I'll do that."

"Okay."

He wrote his mobile number down on the back of a till receipt - the only thing in his wallet resembling a scrap of paper - and slid it across to her. She was the only person in the world who knew his number now, and he wasn't sure he was happy with that because it lent a new dimension to the life he'd invented, and that also meant the life he had left behind measured a little less.

"Let me know when you want me," he said, and then: "I'll take a look at it before I go, shall I?"

She was blushing, he thought, something colourful showing through the porcelain paint. "Thanks," she said. "Thanks a lot."

The door jingled and the two blue suited girls from the bank walked in for their coffees-to-go-go. They were blonde haired and might have been twins, or clones. Hermione got up to serve them, retreated behind her counter, made steam.

He turned back to the sea, thought some more about the running girl, thought perhaps he should spend some time like that, running, getting himself in shape, only running made him sick - a hundred yards and he was doubled over retching his guts up. But maybe he could do something else, anything to get him moving. He was too young to be getting old, and that twinge he'd felt in his knee this morning was telling him time was catching up.

Heart attack, stroke, suicide!

There are plenty of things to prevent a man ever reaching his fifties, Finn.

Maybe he should have slept with Carina.

She was a breaker of moulds, Carina, a knower of the prisons people make for themselves, and she did not believe in denying pleasure, because she knew all too well how short life could be, that it might end meaninglessly at any moment, if not by illness then by stupid accident or by one's own hand. So make love and be merry, was her motto. Maybe a night with her would have been as effective as a whole year of brooding at Carrickbar. After all, no matter how much you thought about a thing, it was always your emotions you went with in the end, wasn't it? And it would have given him courage,... courage to confront Kathleen and the ruin of their lives, the kind of courage a man feels when he knows a woman wants him.

'Another woman.'

'Pah!'

He turned away from the sea, drank his tea.

Sure, he'd not felt like this in a long time.

The door jingled again. This time it was an elderly, Harris Tweedy gent. He walked in a little stiff, tucking a flat cap under his arm, along with a pair of string backed driving gloves. Finn remembered them from yesteryear. Was it still possible to even buy gear like that? He'd not seen the ruby coloured Alvis pull up, saw it now and put the two together: Colonel type, he thought, old English, clipped, the type who'd say: *'I say, old chap.'*

"Hermione, my dear!" Plummy voice, playful. Finn gave an inward nod. Bulls-eye!

"Hello, Lionel, 'darlin."

"Cup of tea, if you please." and then: "My, that's a fancy machine?"

Finn observed Hermione preening. She was indeed proud of her new coffee machine.

"Makes any kind of coffee you can imagine."

"And smells delicious too, but a cup of tea if you don't mind. Longish drive ahead this morning, and coffee has an unfortunate effect on elderly gentlemen like me."

"Oh, now don't you 'elderly' me, Lionel. You're not so old as you try to make out."

"Ah, but alas were I not, I would have asked for your hand twenty years ago."

"But I've only been here for two."

"There, you see. Memory! My, how the years blur. I must be confusing you with someone else."

"Just like all men, Lionel. Build a girl up, then set her down with a bump."

She laughed easily, fluently, like it was no bother. Finn remembered the tension between her and the oily guy from the garage. This was flirting of a different kind; playfully genteel, and she approved of it. But Lionel would have been a devil in his time, he thought. It's just that women liked charm. It glossed over many a sin.

Perhaps if Finn had possessed more charm?

No, Kathleen had not wanted charm. She had wanted a cool head in a suit, and the ability to remain sane while making "difficult" decisions. But that had turned out not to be him. Difficult decisions were the codeword for cutting budgets when people were already struggling, difficult for the victims, not the cutter - unless of course the cutter was Finn, because it made him ill to think of hurting others. It was just a pity the whole world was becoming a difficult decision. It left him few places to run.

Lionel's moustache was razor sharp, and the eyes behind his spectacles were blue and twinkly-keen. He called out a polite "good morning" to Finn, then sat down.

Hermione brought his tea, then tapped Lionel's elbow. "This is Finn," she told him, though for the life of him Finn couldn't understand why, and rather resented the disclosure. "He's renting your house."

Lionel was up at once and sparkling, shaking hands. "Ah, Mr Finucane, I presume. That rather makes me your landlord I'm afraid."

Finn took the offered hand, standing politely, noting as he did so: Omega, ornate lugs, forties style, and in incredibly good nick - gold most likely, a faithful and stylish gentleman's accessory.

Finn approved. "Won't you join me?" he asked.

"Don't mind if I do. Thanks awfully." Lionel brought his tea and sat down. "Everything all right for you? Settling in and all that?"

"Perfectly, thank you."

"Good, good."

Was he for real, thought Finn? He caught the look in Hermione's eye as she retreated once more behind her counter: mischievous, and not a little pleased with herself.

"Your car?" Finn motioned to the Alvis.

"Yes."

"A beauty."

"I think so. Bought her in '75. Hard to believe it, now. I do Molly Coddle her though. My son says I should get something more modern before she bankrupts me with repair bills, but she's hard to part with."

"Yes, lovely car like that, I'd find it impossible. You must be very attached to her."

Lionel nodded, measuring Finn, measuring something in him. Finn detected the scrutiny, shrank away, sat back, glanced aside. "You used to live there, in Elm Street?"

"Grew up there. Couldn't bear to part with the place when my folks passed on."

"Ah,... the agent led me to believe there was an option to buy?"

"Well, yes,... hard times, you know? Interested?"

"Not sure."

"Big commitment. Understand perfectly old chap. But the offer's still there. Anyway, how about you? What brings you to Carrickbar?"

"Me? Oh,... I was with the health service - not a doctor or anything. Management. Financial side. Taking a bit of a career break."

Lionel nodded, and Finn could feel himself being read. "Difficult times, Health Service, and all that." It was a statement designed to lead Finn into further disclosure of intelligence, but Finn parked it with a sigh.

"True, sadly."

They were quiet for a while, Finn a little embarrassed, feeling the sweat leaking out of him, peppering his brow. Lionel detected the shyness, finished his tea, rose smartly. "Well, must go, Mr Finucane. We'll have dinner sometime. Up at my house, eh? My treat."

And Finn was thinking: *dinner? House?*

Lionel offered his hand once more in parting. "I'll drop you a line."

"Em, sure. Thank you. Please call me Finn."

Then he was gone, striding as smartly as his stiffness would allow, bidding Hermione an old fashioned farewell and a touch of his cap.

"You think he won't," she said to Finn. "But he will."

"Won't what?"

"Invite you to dinner."

"Em,... I'm looking forward to it."

Chapter Twelve

But Hermione's thinking: you're a liar, Mr. Finbar. You're a hider. You've come to hide in Carrickbar on the assumption there'll be no one here who wants to know you. Well you'd better run. Clear out, or lock your door, because we're coming for you. Mr Health Service. Mr Management. Mr Financial Side of Things.

Money isn't everything for sure, but a knowledge of it is far from useless, even in a place that's not seen any money in a long time. Hmm, come to think of it maybe he's not the kind to get his hands dirty, humping crap into a skip.

"So,..." he says. "Shall I take a look at this stuff you want shifting?"

"Please. Sorry if I seem a bit,... cheeky. I go too far sometimes. Can't help it. I do appreciate your help. And I will pay you."

"No you won't. Or at least what you were thinking of paying me, you can give to Kyle on top of what you were already thinking of paying him."

Ooh! I like that. A little frisson there, Mr Finn, your assertive side coming through. Awakened, I note, by talk of 'financial matters'.

Your fondness for Kyle is also noted.

She shows him through the side doors, out onto the wind blasted patio. Indeed, the wind is up and takes both their breaths away, makes them step back with the force of it. Maybe it's not the best place for sitting out, she's thinking. But it is winter, and summer here's always a different story.

Finn surveys the wreckage. Hermione surveys him surveying the wreckage. He's overwhelmed. She's asked too much of him. It's a bomb site. It'll take more than a skip. It'll take a whole fleet of trucks to clear it.

"I'm sorry," she says. "It's worse than I thought."

"No," he says. "We can likely shift it in a day. We'll need to break the old tables up, then they'll not take up as much room in the skip. Skips are expensive. You don't want to be ordering more than one."

She's nodding. He has soft hands, and likely pimples on his bottom too from that soft kind of job, and his hands - they're delicate, with tapering fingers like,... like a watchmaker. But he's a doer, this Mr Finbar, and polite, even to a pushy woman like her.

"You'll wear thick gloves," she says. "and mind your hands?" because she would not want him to hurt his hands, but she's feeling stupid even for saying it and blushing again through her paint, and Finn is smiling, nodding. She's thinking of his hands stroking her bottom now while she welds her pubic bone to his and sucks him deep inside of her.

Woa!

"All right," he says.

And then he's gone, strolling down the hill to the promenade, his head a little more upright, not as coiled, and the spit from the sea not making him cower any more. He turns off, slips up the ginnel by the King's Head, and is lost from view. He's going home, a short cut to Elm Street and the little house she first came to know after breaking with Brian, and her mother passing, and her Aunt, and her Dad, and her thinking that in another few years I'll be forty, with nothing but a failed degree in fine art, a beaten up Ford Ka, and a dose of Chlemidia to show for it - thank you Brian you useless cheating bastard!

That was something else you couldn't catch from Mr Hardy. Men were such dirty creatures.

Then, regarding her father, there was the little question of the guilt.

'Don't think about that now, darlin"

Think about,... White!

Okay. She liked white. It showed up the dirt, made it easier to banish, for in life dirt had many a sophisticated way of hiding, even sometimes disguising itself as a wholesome thing, when actually it was pure poison. Could he do it, Mr Finbar Finicane? Him and Kyle? Could they clear a space for her, for the summer to come?

Could he make a difference?

In the summer, after work, she would sit out there, at a table of her choosing, she thought, gaze over the wall at the sea,... fine gravel

under her sandalled toes, little block pavings around the edge. And she would feel like a million dollars. And in the day it would be parasols and cream teas served to ladies in summer frocks and gentlemen in blue blazers and Fedora hats.

Wake up Minnie, you ninny.

You're dreaming of a time before you were born, a time that did not exist, except in sunny seaside posters!

The rain moves in of a sudden, hurls itself with all the hardness of nails against the glass. She shivers, seats herself behind the counter with the Pad, defiantly Googles: Cream Teas, Summer, Anais Nin, sex in middle age, and skip hire. Safe-search is off. The results are surprising.

Chapter Thirteen

Finn arrived back at the house to find Kyle sitting on the doorstep. He looked up as Finn approached, beaming a trusting smile and hopeful eyes. "Mr Finn?"

Finn was unprepared for company and instinctively recoiled as usual at the attempts of others to engage, but Kyle was different. Kyle did not deserve the barrier and the barbed wire treatment, because there was no harm in him by default. And no matter how hard life tried, it would not cloud Kyle's goodness or his innocence. Finn relented, softened. "Oh, hi Kyle."

"Can you fix my watch?"

"Eh?"

Kyle held up rather an expensive looking multi-dialled Rotary. "I must have dropped it." He looked glum. "Dad bought it me for my 16th birthday."

Finn wondered how Kyle knew watches were his thing. Then the rain blew in, and Finn opened the door to get out of it. "Come on inside. You'll get soaked, lad."

"I just thought you might know. Like you knew how to fix my bike."

"Ah!"

Kyle didn't know about Finn's thing with watches at all. It's just that once you revealed yourself as a fixer of things, a fixer of anything, people would ask you to fix all sorts of other things as well: A bike with a wobbly wheel and knackered brakes, a bomb-site of a patio, a broken watch.

Finn took the watch from the hopeful Kyle. It looked okay, not new, but still a fairly modern quartz watch, and he knew very little about the things that ailed them, or how to fix them. A flat battery was all he could think of, but it was with a less than hopeful expression he led Kyle through to his living room and sat down at the desk. Kyle flopped back upon the sofa, sinking into it.

"Wow, great pad, Mr Finn!"

"You like it?"

"Yea, kind of,... bare."

"True. I like it bare."

Kyle nodded in all seriousness, agreeing with Finn that 'bare' was best, that bare was really cool. He looked on, fascinated as Finn produced the tool for unscrewing the back off the watch, waited patiently like an expectant father as the button cell came out and Finn slotted it into the tester. Finn's expression changed then to one of understanding and purpose.

"Can you fix it, Mr Finn?"

"Battery's dead, Kyle."

"Oh,... sounds bad."

"No, it's easy. I can get a new one for you. It's likely nothing you did. Batteries just run out. It's in the nature of them."

"Like with a torch?"

"Exactly. Like with a torch."

"And I didn't break the watch?"

"No."

"And can you, fix it for me,... please? I can pay. No,.. wait." Kyle does a mental calculation of his financial situation. "How much do you think?"

"Couple of quid for the battery. I can order one online. Be here in a few days. Got a mobile phone?"

Kyle shook his head. "I keep sitting on them. Mum says I can have another for Christmas, but not 'til then."

"Okay. Sounds sensible." Finn wrote his number on yet another old till receipt and gave it to Kyle. "Ring me in a couple of days. Okay?"

Kyle nodded. "I can leave it here 'till you fix it?"

"Sure. You all right for telling the time, meanwhile?"

Kyle looked perplexed.

Finn rooted about in his spares box, pulled out an old Timex that had suffered badly from being drowned once. The dial was stained and pitted beyond respectable, but the mechanism had proved miraculously lively after a bit of a clean up and still told the time ridiculously well. "You can borrow this if you like. It's not much to look at, but it does the job. You'll have to wind it every day or it'll stop. Look I'll show you what I mean."

Kyle took the battered old watch, put it to his ear and nodded in appreciation. "That's really cool, thanks, Mr Finn. Thanks. I'll take good care of it."

There was a moment of awkwardness. The business was over, and Kyle was wondering how next to proceed, nodding as if to say: *well, better be going then*,... but not quite knowing how to get it out.

"That's fine, Kyle. Oh, listen Hermione was wondering if you and I could help move some stuff for her?"

"You and me Mr Finn? Sure."

"I'll let her know. You get on your way now. Ring me in a couple of days about the watch, okay?"

"Okay."

When he'd gone Finn leaned back on the door and looked at his phone. He'd erased it of his old life, of the million and one people who knew his number, and his name, buried them under the weight of a Royal Mail stamp and had allowed only two newcomers so far to define his fresh start, two new souls from this supposedly simpler life, a life beside the sea: Hermione and Kyle. Well, that was fine,... he was at least still in control of that.

With the rain hammering against the window now, he lay back upon the sofa, fired up the laptop and was about to navigate to "watch-batteries-r-us", but a notification from his inbox distracted him: Email received,... from Carina.

Kathleen was back from New York.

Chapter Fourteen

Kathleen was on the warpath. He'd not been answering his phone - mobile or work. The HR enquiries desk had put Kathleen through to the head of Finn's department who, after enduring much in the way of rudeness, had told her of Finn's departure.

Suggested course of action, Finn: Mail Kathleen to let her know you're alive, ditto me, Carina.

"You are still alive, aren't you Finn? At least in so far as your heart is still beating?"

He felt a tightening in his chest, and his hands shook at this intrusion of the toxicity of his old life. He felt at once the approach of disaster, the outcome of which he was in no position to influence or escape - what Carina would call the usual psychical impasse, what the Buddhists would call the root of all suffering. But this was normal, normal at least for his old life, the permanent sense of impending doom, and the tingle in his chest that foretold it.

For a moment he was back in the hospital, back in his office, watching his inbox filling up by the hour with appointments to meetings, to conferences, to workshops, to focus groups - some at the hospital, others at conference centres in London, Birmingham, Glasgow. It had been like that for a while, seemed to be growing worse, and none of it amounting to anything at all, none of it solving the problem of there being no more money - indeed at a thousand quid a conference, not including travel and subs, it had seemed only to be contributing to the financial dire straits. But while the budget for drugs and vital equipment was always under pressure, the budget for managerial junkets seemed endless.

And there was always the demand: Respond now! And how would it look if he didn't go to Glasgow, to London, to Birmingham? Could he really say: look, I think this is a waste of money. All I want to do is my work. Here. Now. Then go home at night and rest.

No, not good.

Calm down Finn!

Towards the end he'd begun deleting the mails - just deleting them like that. Gone! And, for a time the tingle in his chest would subside. Some

of the phantom meeting organisers would come back with reminders, so he deleted those as well. Then would come the more persistent reminders via phone call, to which he made vague promises to get back, but did not.

Eventually there had been entire days when Finn would sit in his office alone, the phone switched off - just him and a spreadsheet the size of Africa. He thought people would notice, and question him about his lack of visibility, but they did not. He thought he'd be called in for a stern talking to by his head of department, but he was not. He would rack up the figures, perform the analysis, tickle pound notes from the underbelly of the arcane reaches of the Health Service, attend only the most essential of meetings, then go home at night. And there, no one would speak to him; Kathleen away, the boys bound up in their own nonsense.

But Carina had noticed him, noticed his closed door, his absence at meetings, and in spite of her own staggering case-load had dragged him out into the sunshine, for lunch, even for dinner a few times after work, after she had made sure first to ascertain Kathleen was away. Otherwise he would have eaten sandwiches alone at his desk, or sat in the car on the carpark and played games on his phone. And that she had sat with him in the canteen, made him sit and talk with her, had of course raised eyebrows among the gossips. But no one who had noticed had read the true story, only made up their own, more salacious version, that Finn and Carina were brazenly bonking.

The fact she was trying to save his life was never dreamed of.

After all, what did Finn have to worry about?

Finn had it made.

Finn had everything!

"Okay," she'd told him, during the last of their meetings. "I don't want to see you in work tomorrow."

"Eh?"

"Hand your notice in, go off sick. Stress. Nerves. Anything you want. Lay your plans, and go."

"Can't I just be sick at home for a bit?"

"And how's that going to help if being at home is part of the problem? Go somewhere else, and pretend to be happy. After a while you might just end up being happy for real. Instead of dead. At the end of a rope. A bottle of pills. Or a gas filled car."

"What?"

He shuddered at the memory of that last conversation, her nails dug deep into the backs of his hands as she held them across the table. And the look in her eye,... the pleading that he assume the role of a least one successful intervention.

"I've seen this before, Finn. And it rarely ends well."

But how realistic was it, he wondered? that he could pretend to be happy here, pretend to be keeping the lid screwed down on that other thing. By what trick of mental self delusion could he divest himself of the claustrophobic darkness of his life, and pretend to be expanding now into the space and the light?

How long?

So, mail to Kathleen then: He created a fresh, untraceable Hotmail account. Made no note of the logins since he only intended using it once and was not interested in her reply - or rather he was afraid to consider reading any reply, for even the most benign response would be attached, in his imagination, to razor blades. "I'm fine," he wrote. "As I said, I am away for a bit. Finn."

He also wrote: the boys need to find work, and move out, and we should either spend more time together, hopefully recapturing what we once felt for one another, or we should consider splitting up.

This last bit he deleted, reverting to the more concise version. Then, before he had a chance to reconsider, he clicked "SEND"

Kathleen didn't need him. Nobody actually *needed* him. Could it be so simple at that? The rise of her career these past years had been meteoric. Since the boys had come of age and needed less of her time, she'd devoted more of it to her job. Then a series of inspired transfers had landed her on an escalator to the dizzy heights she'd always been capable of reaching, a potential stalled only by the biological assassin that insisted she have children first.

When the point had come she earned twice Finn's salary, she celebrated by insisting they rearrange their banking, changing from joint to separate accounts. Finn had no idea what she was earning now; enough certainly to pay the boys an allowance - enough to keep them in designer jeans and computer games, pot noodle, and weed for the rest of their lives.

Apart from his own salary, which they clearly didn't need, Finn's physical contributions to family life had atrophied over the years to what didn't seem to amount to more than mowing the lawns. Then Kathleen had relieved him even of that role by paying a man to do the job for him, not because Finn was incompetent, but because there was a tremendous Kudos to be had from owning one's own gardener.

It was a mystery why she did not resent the boys' uselessness when she was so dynamic and work-brattle herself. But everyone had their weakness, he supposed, and the boys were hers, these boys who were now men.

He replied to Carina, felt more the urge to cry on her shoulder - in fact he'd done that once, one lunch time, in her car. Couldn't help it. He could still smell her perfume, feel the texture of her jacket upon his cheek.

"I'm all right," he wrote. "I'm up North. Have money to last a year. Am walking a bit, getting some sea air, and mending watches. Thank you. Finn."

It was a bit of a wooden response to someone he'd been intimate with, at least at the cerebral level - indeed he'd been more intimate in that sense with Carina than anyone in his entire life. But he was stuck for the right words. He was grateful to her. So he'd thanked her.

After sending, he sat back on the couch, something burning in his guts now. It tasted very much like self loathing, the same self loathing he'd felt after handing in his notice, then setting out each morning as if to work, but spending it in the car under trees at local beauty spots, thinking, then going home, tie at half mast, as usual, as if he'd been labouring in the office all day. No one had noticed the change in him. And, feeling worthless as he did, a ghost in the ruins of his former life, it was an easy step to temporarily create a new one.

Except,...

The lid was off now and spilling everywhere, and it would be morning before he could tidy it all safely away. Sea air, a stroll along the beach, mid-winter fresh, then coffee and a fry-up at the Sea View Cafe. The thought cheered him a little, the thought too of Hermione's cheeky smile.

Hmmm,

Hermione,...

Chapter Fifteen

So, Eleven P.M., and Finn, still labouring under a cloud of guilt, was watching news-catchup on the Player. But what he was really thinking of was a shower, and bed, and possibly a bit of online pornography prelude to a damned good wank. But the quiet of late evening, and the gentle hiss of rain on the windows was shattered by a hammering on the door.

It was Helena.

Finn was speechless, stunned, mouth literally agape. At what? Well, at her beauty he supposed but more than that it was her stern, queenly demeanour. But wait, that expression did not bode well,... and he couldn't understand why. I mean, they'd never spoken, so how could he have upset her?

The night was cold, a blast of iced air came past her, filling the house with the scent of the sea. She was holding out the Timex Finn had loaned to Kyle. He assumed the lad had dropped it, broken it, and was ready to wave away her apologies when she said: "What is this piece of shit?"

"Sorry?"

"You give me back boy's watch, now, or I cut your fucking balls. Yes? Then you be sorry."

Finn had not ordered the new battery yet, felt it would no longer be necessary. There was clearly some sort of misunderstanding, but whatever the details of it, the right answer in this situation was always going to be: "Em,... sure."

Finn reached for the Timex, but she pulled it back. "Boy's watch first."

"Okay. You want to come in for a bit?"

"Why would I do that?"

"Em,... Because,... it's raining?"

She gave him a stony look and Finn felt his bowels turn to ice. That was some look. He decided this was no time to insist on being the gentleman, so he left her standing in the rain, and went to get the

watch.

He picked it up from the desk, then turned, surprised to find she'd followed him, and was now in the middle of his living room. She stood in fur coat, short dress and stocking feet, having slipped off her shoes at the door. Something about her stockinged feet sent a shockwave of sexual energy up his legs. He drew back, not quite sure what he was looking at, or what he was feeling.

"Em,..."

The shock, yes the *shock* of her, he supposed, was down to the fact that he was unused to being in the proximity of beautiful women, at least not on the scale of Helena Aynslea, also unused to such impressive self confidence. He did not flatter himself into thinking he might ever aspire to such a woman, but the sheer uncompromising presence of her energised him.
He handed her the watch, arms length, careful not to brush fingers in case she burned. She gave him back the Timex.

"So," he said, venturing clarification: "You don't want me to fix it?"

He detected a momentary opening in the armour, a flicker of doubt.
"Fix?"

"Kyle asked if I could fix it. The battery's flat. I said I'd replace it for him."

"You did not swap it for that,..."

"Swap? No, that's just an old junker I loaned him to tell the time in the,... em,... in the mean time. I was just trying to help the lad out. I'm sorry if I've upset you. It was not intended."

She considered this for a moment, thought back to the tea table and her conversation with Kyle.

"Where did you get that rubbish watch, Kyle?"

"Oh, Mr Finn gave it to me."

"And where is your other, the one from your father?"

"I gave it to Mr Finn."

Finn pretty much came up with the same gist as he read her mind, and he guessed it had been in the nature of Helena Aynslea's life that life would take advantage of anyone not sharp enough or smart enough or tough enough to play it at its own game. And Carrickbar had proved not to be an exception in any of that, perhaps especially for Kyle.

If you were good natured, others cheated you.

Simple.

She softened her look, tilted her head a little to one side. "Apologies for this misunderstanding," she said.

Finn gave his most magnanimous shrug. "Please, lets say no more about it."

She thought some more, then looked him in the eye, the hardness renewed, and he drew back. What the hell had he done now?

"Why you are interested in Kyle, Mr. Finn?"

What did she mean by that? Careful now, Finn: "Em,... I think he has me down as someone who can fix things, Mrs Aynslea. I don't mind. If I can help out I'm glad to."

"This is all you are interested in? And what do you expect in return for your kindness,... from him?"

"Expect? From Kyle? Well,... nothing. Like I said I was just trying to help the lad out. I don't expect anything. What could I possibly expect?"

Sure, he was still in some sort of trouble, or at least under a dark suspicion and he suspected this woman could shout and curse as ugly as she was beautiful, so he had better be careful. But just speaking to her changed something in him, had him longing for something, longing for her approval. He wanted her to like him, and that was a dangerous thing to be wanting.

"You are middle aged man, Mr Finn," she said, coolly, as if explaining the facts of life to an idiot. "You live alone. Is nature of things for some men like you to be attracted to innocent boys. You will understand my suspicion? Understand also if you hurt Kyle in any way, I fucking kill

you. Slow. I know people, Mr Finn. This is not a problem for me. You follow?"

"Okay,.. but really, there's no need for any of that."

"Shall we have policeman look at images on your computer?"

She was bluffing, also overstepping. Finn had to come back at her or she was going to wipe the floor with him. "Em,... your thoughts are unkind, Mrs Aynslea. Also your threats. I do like the boy. His openness is disarming, but,..."

What else could he say? That he felt instinctively protective towards Kyle? Paternal even? But in spite of the TV news which daily provided ample evidence to the contrary he was definitely not a lone middle aged man sexually inclined towards boys. "I mean him no harm, Mrs Aynslea."

She read Finn, read the silence in him now, the look in his eye, decided to read also the look in his eye when she opened her coat and, hands on hips, gave a deliberately suggestive sway to them. She nodded, grave now: "It is my decision, I think to trust you in this respect."

"Em,... okay."

Was he to be flattered? He wished he could reciprocate, but it would be a brave or a foolish man who trusted Helena Aynslea, unless she counted you on her side, in which case she would be a formidable friend. But how did one win Helena Aynslea's friendship? How did one go about melting such a magnificent woman as this to one's cause?

"You will fix watch please? For Kyle?"

Actually, no, you can take that watch, Mrs Aynslea and shove it up your,...

Well, no,... That would be impolite.

Finn sighed, nodded. "Of course I will, Mrs Aynslea."

She handed back the watch, then sat impulsively, and heavily on the sofa. "I'm sorry, Mr Finn. I am,... embarrassed by this,.... mistake. Embarrassed also by mouth, which runs faster than head. You

forgive?"

"Okay, but if you're going to keep calling me Mr, it's Mr Finucane. Otherwise, it's just Finn."

She nodded, looked emotional for a moment, sniffed it away. "You are smart man, Finn. What you do in Carrickbar? This puzzles me."

Eh? The change of subject was disorientating. She'd tugged the carpet from under him in one direction, and now he'd found his feet she'd tugged it in another, up-ended him again. "Em,... smart?"

"White shirt. Always business trousers. No jeans or tee shirt, or scummy tracking bottoms, like,... like every other fucking slob Englishman I meet round here."

"Ah,... well I do own jeans and tee shirts."

She looked at him, attempted to beam warmth but it fell short. "So, clearly you have secret? Tell it to me."

"Secret?"

"We are same. Neither belonging in this place. Only difference is you come by choice. Me against will."

"I have no secret, Mrs Aynslea."

"Then tell me what is not a secret. What you do in this place, Finn?"

Finn thought about it, thought about telling her, wondered too why she would want to know, but he didn't trust her. She was a beauty, yes, and it had no doubt won her many an early victory over men, but Finn had not come here to play games like that. He had left his women behind: Kathleen, and Carina. It was a little early to be thinking of another.

"I just,.. want to be alone for a bit. I want to think, breathe."

"This is no answer." She teased open her coat again, arranged it more comfortably, revealing the dress, short and tight and ridden up a good deal of thigh, the neck low, plunging, revealing the pale half moons of her breasts. She watched his expression, shy but obvious enough. "Want to fuck me, Finn?"

She had already worn that word out, he thought: Fuck, fuck, fucking.

"Mrs Aynslea,... please."

"Of course you do. Only reason I trust you with Kyle is way you look at me I know for sure this man is not interested in young boys."

"Then,... I apologise, and I assure you,... I'm not looking for anything of that sort, indeed of any sort, with young boys, or with,... women, no matter how attractive."

"Assure? I know. I understand, this is not personal." She shook her head. "Sadly, it never is." She rose as suddenly as she had sat down, impulsive, tossed by the storms in her head. "I say goodnight then." And then, pausing in the doorway as he saw her out. "We are both fishes out of water here. Is this what you say? No one can know me, like you wish no one to know you. But I think we had better be friends all the same. Yes?"

"Em,... friends? That would be my pleasure, Mrs Aynslea."

"Helena. As for your pleasure I cannot imagine it, Finn. For sure, you have the feel of a man who has been without pleasure for a very long time. How do I know this? Because I have been there before you." She reached up, placed a hand on his shoulder and kissed his cheek. "From the bottom, the only way is up. Unfortunately, for us both, I think we are still falling. Yes?"

"Good night, Helena. Oh and,.."

"Yes?"

"This old watch. Do you want it for Kyle."

She nodded, took the watch, lowered her eyes from his, a secret kept. "Thank you, Finn. You are kind man. You are a gentle man."

Chapter Sixteen

Hermione is riding back from Weston with Lionel. It's late evening, and she's dropped her car off at the garage for an MOT and service. She's thinking it's a pity she can't use Squinty's place, it being walking distance from the cafe, but that's fraught with danger, both for her car and her self respect. No one who knows Squinty would ever ask him to fix anything.

The problem was getting back from Weston. The bus ran once every hour and a half, and knocked off at six - in other words useless. The other options were a taxi - too expensive - or she scrounged a lift, which could be compromising, depending on who you asked. Lionel was a charmer of course, but a gentleman with it. She might have asked Finn but he'd not been in the cafe for a while, and she was shy of ringing him now it was official she had a crush on him.

'A crush, Minnie?'

'Well of course I do!'

It feels much later than five thirty - more like midnight, in the rain. And the Alvis burbles comfortably along, smells of Old Spice and Johnstons Baby Powder.

"This is very kind of you, Lionel."

"Nonsense my dear, I was in town anyway."

"Are you sure I can't pay you for the petrol?"

"Now, don't offend me, Hermione."

"Free breakfast then?"

"Typical of a woman, tempting a man through his stomach. And I am tempted,... but in fact actually,... I was wondering,..."

"Go on."

"Invited that new chap, Finn, up to the house for dinner."

Hermione is amused and surprised. "You actually *officially* invited him, Lionel?"

"Oh yes. Sent out a proper invitation, RSVP and all that, bit old fashioned I know, but he, well he RSVP'd right back and now what I need is,... well,... dinner. Polite chap. Decent sort, I think. Just felt I should get to know him better, that's all. Help him settle in,... and all that."

"Oh, Lionel. You're as bad as me not thinking things through. Can't you just bang some ready meals into the oven? Bottle of wine and no one will notice. And I don't think he'd care. Doesn't look a fussy kind of man."

"Well, I suppose you're right. But,... look, you wouldn't,... no, too much to ask, I suppose."

"What? You want me to come up to your house and cook dinner for you and Finn McFinbar?"

"It's Finucane, isn't it?"

"Somethin' like that. But isn't that a bit,..."

"What dear?"

"You know,... sexist,... asking a woman to do the cookin' for you. Like you can't be bothered learnin' yourself. Come the revolution, darlin', you'll be one of the first to be banished to the kitchen."

"Oh? I'd not thought of that either,... sorry, dear."

She laughs. "Only jokin'. 'Course, I'll do it. Tell me when."

"Really?" Lionel smiles, relieved.

There are rabbits illuminated in the headlight beams at the roadside. Hermione is praying none will leap into their path. Lionel is a steady driver, but she'd hate for anything like that to happen.

"What do you know about him?" he asks.

"Finn? Nothing."

Her denial is too quick and Lionel scents something. "Rumour is you make him a lot of breakfasts."

She blushes, but fortunately it's too dark for him to see. "I shall ignore that double entendre."

"I assure you none was intended. You're making up your own stories there."

She tries to remain cool. "Like I said, I know nothing about him."

"You mean he's not even had the decency to flirt with you?"

"Now Lionel,..."

"Really. The cheek of it. And I'd taken him for a gentleman!"

"I think Mr Finbar has eyes for someone else." It was said quickly and in self defence, something to deflect Lionel's line. But of course Lionel's next question has to be: "Who?"

"Oh you know,... *her."*

"Her? Who her?"

"Helena."

"Helena Aynslea? Ah,... Queen of Carrickbar, and who can blame him? But how do you know?"

"She came in the cafe when he was there, and,... well, you could just tell by his expression. You know, the way his tongue was hangin' out."

"Oh, I'm sure you exaggerate. Anyway wouldn't I read much into that. Helena's a beautiful woman of course, as are you my dear, but Helena possesses something you do not."

"Oh? Careful now. I warn you I've not had a good day and may cry easily."

Lionel laughs. "A haughtiness. That's what she has. You're friendly, warm, approachable. She'd cold, rivets men to the spot with her glare, leaves them weak in her presence, even though the look in her eye says she'd as soon stab them in the neck as look at them. Even me, at my age, and long married and recently widowed, even I would harbour private fantasies about Helena Aynslea's favours. A foolish man might

try to follow through on that and reap the whirlwind as a result of it, but Mr Finabar is no fool, at least I didn't take him for one. So,... anyway. Your secret's safe with me."

"Secret? What secret?"

"That you're in love with Mr Finbar."

"I am not! You take that back."

"Well, that you *like* him then."

"'Course I like him, but I also like you,... and..."

"Careful now. I have feelings too and may also cry easily."

"Don't say anything to anyone, Lionel. Promise me. That would be too embarrassing."

"I won't say a word. And anyway how could I? I hardly speak to anyone."

"Nonsense, you talk to everyone. Even the people you don't like. You're the biggest gossip in the village. You even talk to that old rogue Squinty Mulligan."

"Well, so do you."

"Because I have no choice and he prefers his pies hot to cold. And sometimes it's not worth the bother even of that 'cos his money's always so greasy."

"Oh, he's not so bad."

"Then why not take your car there for repairs? Why go to Parker's, in town, like me?"

"Point taken. And the price of his petrol's an insult to everyone, but I'm sure he has his human side."

"Then invite him to dinner with you and Mr Finbar."

Lionel thinks, laughs. "That would be interesting, but perhaps another time. Why don't you join us instead?"

"Not likely. It'll look like you've set us up, and I'm really not interested in him, not in that way. He seems a nice man, but he's married."

"Married? Well if that's true, my dear, where is his wife?"

"I don't know. But whatever the truth of Mr Finn McFinbar, I'm not the kind of girl who'd look twice at a man who'd look at me while he was still married. Well, not any more I'm not."

"Oh?"

"Eyes on the road Lionel. Listen, I'll cook you dinner, but don't you go inviting me to join you in the eatin' of it. No way am I sittin' down with you or Finn. All right?"

"Point taken my dear, and admirably nailed home."

The Alvis pulls up outside the cafe and Hermione steps out, waves Lionel goodbye. She turns to put the key in the lock, listens for a while. There's a heavy tide ramming against the sea wall, an elemental crashing and kerdunking and a foam-sizzling that she can plainly hear above the rain and the wind. Sometimes she lies awake at night listening to the sea. Mostly it's a gentle sound, a lullaby to carry her away, but on nights like this it's easy to imagine the one rogue wave out there that'll breach the wall and smash the cafe to pieces, carry her out to sea, or drown her in her bed.

Those new tables she's thinking about for the tea garden, they'd better be well bolted down. There's something in the sea that reminds her of life's impermanence, that everything can be swept away when you least expect it, and it matters nothing how much you've worked or how much you think you deserve a thing, there's always something or someone bigger than your petty sense of self importance.

Lionel must be eighty. Another ten years and he'll be gone, and all that charm will be just a memory, no one knowing or caring if he'd lived or not. Same with her.

'Fuck's sake, Minnie, buck up will you?'

She has a light tea of left-overs from the griddle, squirt of decent coffee. Takings for the day £22.50, most of which are accounted for by one old couple's breakfast and Squinty's pies. At this rate she'd be

better selling both Squinty and Finn her favours, though she knows which she'd prefer, realises also with a wry smile which of them would more easily be teased up to pay the higher price. *Wanna see my tattoo, Squinty, darlin'?* It's just as well she was never any good at that sort of thing,... at least according to Brian. And he would know, having had plenty of opportunity to compare - the fornicating, cheating bastard!

Then it's TV. Soap, suitably anaesthetizing and less expensive than gin. Then it's a chick lit novel from the charity shop: too silly and optimistic for the way she's feeling. More TV, zapping to Beeb 4 and a finger jabbing documentary on Quantum Mechanics, momentarily mesmerising, but could she be bothered thinking any of it was even remotely relevant any more? Sure, they seem to be on the threshold of unlocking the secrets of life, the universe and everything, just as we're about the go destroying it - like anyway. She supposes the universe will go on without us. But what would be the point in that?

Surely,... we're the universe becomin' aware of itself. So it wouldn't go pokin' it's own eyes out, would it?

She zaps her way clean through into the music channels, turns the set off, then stands at the window overlooking the sea, sees only herself in the black mirror of darkness beyond, framed and distorted to a smeared ugliness by runny glass. She unfastens her shirt, drops it, slips off the bra, peels down the pants and looks at herself. There is the frisson of her exposure against the glass, but there's nothing beyond except the sea tonight, and the tide is in. Common sense assures her there are no salty Sams to whistle at her skin.

She thinks of Finn, imagines his touch.

'Sure, what's not to die for Minnie?'

She decides on an early night, lies there a while still naked, resists at first, but finally relents, tugs open the drawer and lets Mr Hardy back into bed. He feels oddly cold tonight and too much of the hardness of false promises. That guaranteed aching shudder is pragmatically stunning though, and sees her through until morning. Then it's dawn and a new day, and the sea is calmer, the tide drawn back by miles - the sooner she grows out of this the better.

She wonders if he'll call today - Finn that is - slips from bed, stubs her toe on the bathroom door, tears the nail, makes blood.

Chapter Seventeen

Finn replaced the battery in Kyle's watch and set it aside. He thought it curious how technology had long ago solved the trick of good timekeeping, yet he preferred the ritual of a wind-up watch and the old fashioned mechanical oscillation of a spring and a lever that wasn't even half as accurate.

It was a familiar story, that what he liked in life made no sense to the balance sheet, and that what he had been taught to believe was right and sensible and proper, actually, he did not like at all and had rebelled against it all his life. He did not fit the world any more. Would it have been different had he been an adult in the sixties, rather than a child. Would he have fitted in then? Or was it something else that was missing, like the keystone holding up the weight of everything else? What was his keystone, and where had it gone?

Old questions Finbar.

Meanwhile, he settled in some more with the sale of an Avia and a Rotary which funded the purchase, at last of rather a nice Bernex, circa 1963. The fact of these little parcels emanating from and then arriving at his door, addressed to him, his name, 14 Elm Street, Carrickbar gradually rendered his new reality all the more convincing, that he was not dreaming, that he was alive here, living in Carrickbar, and for most of the time feeling better than he had in years.

As if he were on holiday all over again.

'Well do you see it Finn?'
But thinking of it now brought to mind at last the question of why did he not care more about what Kathleen might be feeling at his absence. Indeed, he had been admirably adept thus far at evading the question, so confident was he in her ability to manage her own life without him. Financially, this had always been the case. He supposed it was the fact she had for so long seemed to require nothing of him, emotionally, that allowed him to carry his feelings further into this total sense of redundancy.

He had read stories of cold war spies, so immersed in their cover that after a while they began to believe in it as a reality, their old life, their real life, fading into unreality. Perhaps that's what was happening to him here.

"You have your choices, Finn." Carina again: "Heart attack, stroke, nervous breakdown, suicide, or run."

Carina had seen it before, many times. People, men, struggling on to destruction because they thought life offered no alternative, even though the door to escape was open all the time. "It's just that life has a way of camouflaging it," she'd said. "So you do not recognise it any more."

The end of a rope, a handful of pills, or a car filled with fumes?

'Change the subject, Finn. Don't dwell on this now.'

He'd been having problems with the postman.

He'd been going to the door to find the little red card pushed through, which told him the postman had called, that he hadn't been in to receive his parcel. Except he never went anywhere until after the postman had called, if he was expecting a parcel, because otherwise it meant a long drive to get his parcels from the Post Office at Weston. He was sure the postman filled the red cards out before he began his shift, that he had no time to actually knock on a door and wait for someone to take delivery. Financial logic again: how to save money in the postal service? Cut the number of postmen and give each of those remaining more post than they can deliver, stonewall the complaints.

So, Finn had switched to the cheap little upstart courier who used the newsagents as a pick up and drop-off point - same courier that no doubt treated its drivers like slaves. This had introduced him to the bitter looking Mrs Mackintyre, sole proprietor of Mackintyre's Newsagents. She was a tweedy, wide hipped dame of some sixty years who would take Finn's parcels with a look of disapproval, as if she suspected the worst of him. It was the same with his parcels for collection. She did not, however, enquire officiously of their contents like they did at the post office, and he did not offer. Instead, he bought Kitkat and sparkling water in an attempt to sweeten her.

It did not.

This was the only novelty, the only expansion of his narrow life, this occasional diversion to Mackintyres with his parcels. He had wandered by the King James on occasion, wondering to try it for a change, but had no liking for beer. And the raucous laughter he often heard coming from within suggested it was not his sort of watering hole anyway.

He had made an effort to avoid calling at the cafe for a while, telling himself he was conscious of the perils of too many cooked breakfasts, that it was definitely nothing to do with the strange, tingly embarrassed feeling he got when he imagined Hermione looking at him. Instead he was making do with boiled eggs and toast, then a walk up the hill out of town, and back along the beach.

Carina had reminded him to keep fit, that a healthy body did indeed help in maintaining a healthy mind, that he'd not to descend into slothfulness. The beach, though sandy, was never at its best, appalling mounts of litter washed in with each tide, but the scent of the sea was at least genuine, and exhilarating to a man who had spent most of his adult life in an inland town.

Throughout Finn's first weeks in Carrickbar, the winter disagreed with him, turning ever colder and sharper and more cutting, so it was a struggle even to persuade himself outside some days. And in the evenings he would tinker with his watches as the rain lashed the window. There were successes, like with the Bernex, and the Roamer, which required a basic clean and a drop of oil to restore them to working condition. But there were failures too, moments of impatience, one of which lost him the Cardinal, when he'd slipped with the back-opener and ran the blade into the balance, mangling it beyond repair.

At such moments, he felt his confidence ebb, wondered then what he thought he was still doing there. Why not pay up the rent he owed, and quit? It would be Christmas soon, and though he took no notice of it these days, there was still something in the Pagan remnants of his soul that recoiled at the thought of passing Yule alone. He tried to remember if he had ever spent it alone before, realised he had not.

Would the kids miss him? Only for his festive-season bank transfer. He could do that remotely anyway. And Kathleen? She normally filled the house with so many friends and colleagues and callers, it would be a wonder if she noticed him missing at all. Only Kathleen could turn Christmas into a networking event. Finn usually spent the day in his study waiting for the last of the guests to leave, then face Kathleen's barbed comments about his unsociable nature.

She had not thought for a moment he might be ill.

Carrickbar had a way of teasing him, of reducing him to despair, but then he would step out of a morning to find an unexpectedly mild day,

welcoming with a gorgeously seductive yellow light. Gulls would call, and the streets would be illuminated in passing strokes, hinting at their summer glory days, days when the handful of tourists and day trippers would make their return.

He'd had no fresh updates from Carina for a while and was thinking that, for all of his indifference, he would have to go back at some point, if only to see if the boys had burned down the house.

'When the money runs out, Finn. Not before!'

"But this is not about them," he heard Carina reminding him. "It's about you."

"But that's what family life is like, Carina. You sacrifice yourself for the good of your children and the happiness of your wife."

"But not to the extent of killing yourself, Finn. And I'll let you into a little trade secret: you can't actually make others happy if it's not within them to be happy in the first place. You only make yourself unhappy trying, while they drain the life out of you."

He was thinking on this as he climbed the hill by the Sea View cafe. He was thickly wrapped, managed a wave and a nod to Hermione as he passed. She'd looked a bit glum behind her counter, the cafe empty. There was not the usual sparkle in her, and only rather a half hearted wave in reply. He hoped she was okay, wondered about calling in later, but the thought of it embarrassed him as usual.

He supposed it was that he didn't want her to think he was thinking about her, *not in that way*, *anyway*,... like he was going to make a nuisance of himself by admiring her, like Squinty. He hoped he'd not said anything to offend her. She'd not looked quite so,... friendly as she usually did. She'd not called him up about moving that stuff yet either, and he wondered if she'd changed her mind.

He climbed up by the bank - ATM still not working - to the big house, and the path that led off down to the cliffs, and the sea. Coming up was a woman, snug in overcoat and fur hat, her hair whipped across her eyes by the wind. She was struggling for breath, hands on knees as she paused. Finn looked around for some other way to get down to the beach unseen, but it was too late, and anyway why would he want to avoid her?

"Helena."

"Oh,... Finn. This is most,... inconvenient."

"Inconvenient?"

"This,... out of fucking breath." She coughed, looked away to blow her nose, wiped her eyes. "Age is catching up. Today I am forty."

"You are?" He wondered about telling her she didn't look it, which she didn't, but he worried she would take it as a cheap compliment. Then he realised as usual he worried about all sorts of things when he was near people, especially women.

Carina had noticed that too, warned him it was a symptom of something deeper, that what he needed perhaps most of all was to surround himself with women and learn again how to relate to them without the constant debilitating masculine desire to shag every one of them.

Sexual frustration was the most likely cause of his problems, she concluded.

Or to Hell with it, Finn. Shag as many as will let you,..

"Hap,... happy birthday," he said.

"Pftt. Happy is a long time ago. Listen, I have apologised to you?"

"Apologised? For what?"

"Treating you like sneaking thief and sex predator of young boys."

"Oh, that. Yes,.. yes. You apologised."

"Good. So, I forget. I am forgiven this already?"

Finn shrugged. It was a strength, Carina had told him, that he did not take insults personally, but that it was not necessarily healthy to have ones ego totally destroyed by others.

"I make peace offering, please," she said. "You want coffee?"

Finn wondered if she meant walking down to the cafe, and the thought

of that made him feel awkward, the thought of Hermione overseeing his conversation, and his feelings about that, as most things, puzzled him. "Em."

Awkwardness again, Finn? Sexual frustration. Thanks for putting that one in my head, Carina.

"I live just here," said Helena.

"You do?"

"Yes. You will come inside please."

A tet-a-tete with Helena, in private then? He wasn't sure this was any wiser than a walk down to the Sea View, but at least there would be no one to witness his embarrassment. And Helena was a beautiful woman. And she energised him, at least when she was not insulting him, or making him afraid.

"Em,.. okay."

She made to move, missed her footing on the path, stumbled forward a little, the wind also giving her a push toward him. Finn caught her hand, her elbow, steadied her. She came up to him, regained her feet, but did not let go. Instead, she held tight, her fingers clasped around his, her grip firming in the way men test their grip when shaking hands. He felt a resolve in her and tried to match it. She gave a nod, then curled her arm into his, linked tight, and had him support her all the way to the door.

"Hate this fucking winter," she said.

"You surprise me. I thought Russian winters would be much harder than this."

"Who says I am Russian?" Her head sailed a little higher, prouder. "I am from Georgia. You will please remember this." Then, releasing him: "Thank you." She smiled. "Long time since I was there. Georgia. Twenty years. Half my fucking life. Does this make me also half Englishwoman now? Or am I piece of rotting driftwood, washed on shore of cold and empty land? You English, you are ingenious people, and kind in your own way, but also completely fucking frigid-cold. Racist. You have no passion."

Finn sighed, suspected she was right.

It was a dark house, inside, deep colours: reds and blues and bottle-greens and a uniform mahogany furniture throughout. But there was a polish to it and an old world comfort. It reminded Finn of his Grandmother's house, that same air of gentility and Sunday afternoon cakes, and tea in China cups. It was not what he was expecting. She led him through to the back, to a conservatory - hard wood and condensation, overlooking a strip of pretty garden, dunes beyond, and then the sea.

"Sit."

Finn sat.

Yes, there was comfort here, a calmer side to her, he noted, one he had not suspected her capable of. And money of course. Above all, she was not without money.

"Em,... is Kyle about? How's he going on these days. I've fixed his watch by the way. I could have brought it. Didn't know you lived here. Thought he might ring."

She smiled, something knowing in it as she read the choppy waves of his defences. "Kyle finds job filling shelves for frosty Mrs Mackintyre today."

"He does? Oh, well. That's something."

"No. Is nothing, but best he can manage in backwards dump like this." And then, lowering her tone to a silky stage-whisper. "We have home alone for hours." She raised an eyebrow, flicked out her hair, smiled seductively.

Finn blushed. "Em,... did I tell you I was married, Helena?"

Dimples. He'd not seen her dimples before. Perhaps that was because she'd not smiled before, not really. But she was smiling now, he thought, or rather she had been a moment ago, and they were the most charming dimples. She was not flirting, he told himself, not seriously anyway. She was just playing with him. Sexually she was powerful, confident, but he had nothing she wanted, so she would not be picking on him. Thus he was unafraid, or so he told himself. She read this too.

Truce.

"I make coffee," she said.

He looked around, saw no birthday cards. Surely Kyle would have sent her one? Had she even told him it was her birthday? She had not looked like she was in the mood for celebrating. Perhaps Kyle had forgotten. Out of habit, he made a note in the diary on his phone. Birthday. Aynslea. Helena. 40. Then he wondered why he was doing it. He would not be here next year, so why bother remembering it?

Helena returned with coffee which she served in cups with saucers, and she sat daintily on the sofa opposite him, heels drawn to one side, together, finishing-school style, head upright, ladylike. "So, listen, " she said. "Husband works in London city. Has flat there, and big house in Surrey. Much in way of luxury. Mistress also."

"Ah,..."

"You?"

"Me? Mistress?"

"No, wife. You have wife. You say you are married."

"Wife,... yes,..."

Helena waited for him to go on, raised a brow to get him going, then gave up on the subtlety: "And?"

"Em,... I don't know really." What did she want him to say? "She's away a lot. Advertising executive."

Finn was aware of her reading him, suspecting by now that in spite of appearances she was very good at it, empathic too. It was a good survival tool, as was detecting lies.

She raised a hand, dismissive. "So, you don't tell me. Is fine."

"Tell you what?"

A patient look now, like she was dealing with an amiable dunce. "This is how friends work, Finn. I show you a little bit of mine, you show me a

little bit of yours. Is game. Called chit chat. Yes?"

"Show me your?..."

"This will be difficult, I see. Dirty washing, Finn. There is plenty dirty washing with me and husband. You have dirty washing too,... with wife?"

Of course this was none of her business, and he didn't know her that well, wasn't even sure he liked her - well that wasn't true; he liked her all right, but wasn't sure if he should be more afraid of her than he was. "I'm not denying things are complicated at home, Helena. Otherwise I wouldn't be here, I suppose. I mean in Carrickbar. On my own."

"Yes. This I have already noted. Also, you must have very understanding employer, I mean to take extended personal sab,... sabotage? Is this the right word."

"You probably mean sabattical, but sabotage isn't far off the mark. I,... quit my job. Sabotaged my career at rather a crucial juncture to be honest."

"Crucial?"

"Just about at the same time my pension pot matured to the point where it meant anything."

"Ah! This is better. This is dirty washing, Finn. This is confidence." She waved her hand dismissive, touched her fingers to her lips. "Don't worry. I am trustworthy with this. No one speaks to frost-bitch Helena anyway. Which is why I am hungry for dirty washing. Okay, my turn, listen: I live off generous husband. He is conflicted man, treats me poorly, but also has feelings of guilt on account of string of tart bitch mistresses and London Luxury. He makes this better by generous monthly payment to bank account and spoiling Finn with gifts of gadgets he is too clumsy to keep for more than a week. Now you. What is your job?"

"Was. Health service."

"You are Doctor?"

"Accountant. Was. I mean, still am I suppose. Just not working."

"Are we what we do, Finn? I do nothing. Does this make me also nothing?"

"You're a mother to Kyle."

"Yes. And more perhaps. Always I hope for more. You? You are gentle man, Finn."

"A Gentleman?..."

"I am dangerous for you, of course."

"I don't think so, Helena. There's nothing I want from you, and I possess nothing you could possibly ever want from me. There's safety in that for us both, I think."

She laughs, claps her hands in delight. "Yes, I know this. It refreshes me you know this also. So I wonder, is it Hermione?"

"Is what Hermione?"

"Who you want."

"What? No,... I don't want anyone. I have a wife. Why would I want anyone - there's more to life than,... relationships all the time."

Helena wasn't listening. "She is a pleasant woman, Hermione. Good to Kyle. Conflicted with me for some reason. She is much better looking, I think, than me and I suppress some jealousy on that account. I see her run on beach. Has great body, great arse. But she makes less of herself than I do. And she dislikes me for doing so. Women are like that. But we must all use what we have, Finn. Yes, Hermione will be good for you."

"Well,.. thanks for the advice, but I'm not looking for a relationship, with anyone."

"So you say. But really is very simple. You are wrong. We all look for relationship. All the time. Even in relationship, we look for another. It is human."

"No, really. It's too complicated."

"Granted this is true. But have you never had affair?...."

"No. You?"

"Of course, yes,... many times. It can be very refreshing."

"Ah."

She laughed. "Joke, Finn. Chance is fine thing in this fucking place." She released the dimples. "Wife?"

"Wife? Affair you mean,... heavens no. No, that's not the problem."

"So, what is problem?"

"You tell me, Helena. I'm married, I have two adult sons, a nice house. I did have a good, secure, well paying job. Good pension in the making. Do you see a problem with any of that?"

"Of course. Could be married, and lonely. I have written this book. But now is good start, Finn. Between us, I mean. We no longer feel quite so lonely as before. Yes?"

Finn nodded. "A good start. Thank you." He smiled. "But I will never sleep with you, Helena."

She pulled a face. "Pftt,... as if I will ever let you. Waste body like mine on man like you."

"Good. Well, so long as we're clear on that. And I'm probably not that good a shag anyway."

Helena laughed. "I am impressed of course by your modesty. But this makes me all the more certain you should sleep with someone while you're here. And I am decided it will be Hermione."

Finn laughed, a little too loudly. "Why for heaven's sake?"

"A man loses confidence in sex is only half a man. And she is single. Unless you prefer Mrs Mackintyre?"

"Em, I'm sure Mrs Mackintyre's very nice,..."

Helena clapped her hands. "Oh, you are so polite, Finn. I applaud you. She only employs Kyle so she can learn all there is about me. And

Kyle is so trusting he will tell everything he knows, which is fortunately nowhere near as much as I have told him."

Yet she was willing to trust Finn with her secrets. Unless these were not secrets but rather the things she wanted everyone to know, and were not necessarily true. Indeed it struck him she seemed at times intent on sowing the seeds of her own mythology. Again he felt a wonderful lightness in her company, and a satisfaction in himself he had discovered at last the confidence to be easy in the presence of a woman like this, and all because he told himself there was nothing either of them wanted from the other.

"Look, Helena. I think we have an understanding. We can be friends, right?"

"Of course."

"So, seeing as it's your birthday - your *fortieth* birthday - will you let me buy you dinner tonight?"

He'd surprised her with that. Her eyes flickered open a little wider than their usual narrow haughtiness, but he detected no resistance to the idea, no off-hand dismissal. However,..

"Dinner? Finn, what planet you on? Where is dinner, please? We travel ten miles for fish and chips at Weston? There is no pretentious middle-class dinner in Carrickbar. This is last place on earth. This is land 'pretentious dinner' has forgotten."

But she had not refused him, and this surprised him. Indeed he rather wished she had, because suddenly he wondered what he was doing.

And what was he doing?

Well, he was offering a hand, like the hand that had steadied her on the steps outside, something to restore her dignity, and he had no choice now other than to plough on: "I know a hotel. About forty minutes drive. Stayed there on business once. It wasn't too bad, actually. Pretentious yes, but not overbearingly so. Kyle must come too, of course."

"Kyle? No way. Dinner is not for teenagers. I make him beans on toast. Then we go. He stays in, watches television. Everyone is happy. Thank you, Finn. I am very pleased to have dinner with you." She

pauses, lends him a half seductive smile. Dimples again. "But be careful."

"Oh?"

"In thinking there is nothing I want from you. In fact, since I know myself very well by now, I am also knowing I am sure to come up with something in the end."

Chapter Eighteen

Hermione runs. She runs up by the bank, then past the big old house of Helena no-knicks where she's been meaning to call for days now, but is afraid to.

'Why afraid, Minnie?'

'Don't ask me that now.'

She doesn't take the path down by the house to the sea, but runs on for a mile, in spitting rain, by the roadside, past the old campsite, to the next path, the one that snakes down through the dunes and gives her a longer run back to the harbour. It's cold this morning. She wears furry mittens, thinks she resembles an overgrown infant forbidden from biting its nails.

'Nails, Minnie,... always were rag-ended!'

It's later than usual. Mid morning. Wednesday. She closes the cafe on Wednesdays and Sundays out of season. Since when? Since for the last month no one has shown up on those days. Not even Squinty. It's a new regime. Starts today. It's called: 'Fuck it'.

On the return run she spots the old white house peeping over the dunes, Helena's house. If you're going to be dumped somewhere, you could do worse. It's a biggish place, but must be lonely and the wind must do some howling around all those chimney pots.

She gathers courage and trots up the steps, gasping for air by the time she makes the top. And there she waits a while drawing breath, and with each breath another drop of courage before she dares to knock.

Why she does not like Helena is a mystery; they have never argued.

Helena answers in dressing gown and something silky underneath. Even full of sleep she looks just so damned intimidatingly perfect, makes Hermione feel like dirt, like a woman who can never attract the kinds of men Helena can attract with ease.

'Men, Minnie?'

'Yes, you know?...Gentlemen. Money men..'

Ah, yes, the charming, elegant, energetic lovers of woman-kind, when all she can attract is an oily pervert whom, incidentally, she has noticed shrivelling to nothing and slinking away for fear of Helena no-nicks Aynslea. She doubts Squinty will ever have the nerve to ask to see Helena's tattoos. So why so bold with Hermione? Is it because she does not exude the false airs of a lady?

Helena is surprised, but not unpleasantly. Indeed there seems a puzzling light in her eyes that Hermione reads as welcoming, but that can't be,... can it? Unless she's taking the piss.

"Yes?"

"Em,... I woke you?"

Helena is puzzled. "No."

"Is,... is Kyle around?"

"Today is Wednesday?"

"Yes."

Helena sounds sleepy, something soft and husky in her voice. "Then he's in bed. How long since you were a teenager, Hermione? If he is not working at Mackenzie's shop, he sleeps till midday. Mid afternoon sometimes. Impressive. I cannot sleep much past sunrise any more. Too much bed makes my back ache."

Hermione wishes she could be like that – husky voiced, and doe eyed and sexy in silk, and even just out of bed not smelling of morning breath or of the griddle by night. "Oh,... Okay. Bad timing, then. Sorry. I'll go."

Helena opens the door wide, unnerved but also amused by her sudden popularity. "No. Please. Come in. I make most of this while I can."

"Sorry?"

"Five years on top of this fucking hill, and most I get is curled lip of contempt from natives of Carrickbar, and now? Now everybody is my friend."

Hermione arms herself, ready to do battle. "Look, if this is a bad time."

"No time is bad time, Hermione." Helena tries a smile, forces it into sincerity. "I'm glad you called. Really."

"You are?"

Hermione isn't convinced by the tone, but her natural curiosity gets the better of her and she is suddenly across the threshold. She doesn't like the house. Too dark. Dark wood. Dark, fussy furniture and - ughhh - nicknacks. Helena must spend all her time dusting. But it is at least clean, and there's a smell of something not far from wholesome. And of course now there's Helena in all her cool regalness, and the house is warm and Hermione's about to sweat like a pig in her jogs, after her run. "I can't stay long," she says.

"Cafe closed today? What else you do in Carrickbar to make you rushing home?"

"You'll find out any second. I,... I just wanted to ask Kyle if he'd mind helping me move some stuff."

"Ah yes, he knows this. Is no problem. He is already happy to do this for you."

"He knows?"

"Finbar has asked him. He helps you too? Finbar? Hmm. Finbar is very handy man, is he not?"

"Em,... yes. Handy."

Helena decides it is better not to mention last night - dinner with Finbar. Such things are easily misunderstood between women.

Hermione begins to sweat, wipes her cheeks and her brow on her sleeves, tucks her mittens under her arm, prays for cool air and hopes the ice-maiden hasn't noticed.

"You are very sweaty. Want to shower?"

"Em,... need to,... desperately. I'll go. I can ring Kyle then?"

"Yes. But you can shower here. I make tea. Then we can chit chat like ladies of leisure. I find you clean towel and spare gown. Please. This

will be nice."

Is she for real, thinks Hermione? What weird kind of game is this? How can she possibly shower and towel dry in Helena's house? But why not? Because Helena has a body like a Greek goddess, that's why not, and a way of making every other woman angry, whether she means to or not, and there's no way Hermione's sitting wearing nothing but a dressing gown, drinking tea, with Helena Aynslea preening in her face with her perfect teeth and her perfect arse and her perfect tits. She'd be more comfortable sitting naked in Squinty's office. Well, almost. No, what Hermione needs is to be fully dressed and starched and made up if she's to deal with Helena.

Unless,... for all of that aggravating perfection and the haughty expression, Helena is just as lonely as everyone else? And she's watching, waiting, reading the hesitation on Hermione's part as what? As one more rejection, one more cold shoulder. So she wants to be what? Friends is it? Okay then.

"If you're sure,..."

There is no smile of relief. It is a matter of fact now. Helena shows Hermione to the bathroom. It smells of bath oil, is old fashioned, avocado, possibly even seventies vintage, but well scrubbed. It is, above all, clean - the tiles, the porcelain all sparkling. And all the time Helena is reading her down the length of that imperious nose. Hermione locks the door, undresses - feels a little queer about it as she does so - then drapes a fresh towel over the side of the bath and sits on it.

'How the hell did that happen then Minnie?'

'And why lock the door?'

The shower gel and shampoo are expensive, delicately scented, and definitely did not come from the Carrickbar mini-mart. She feels uncomfortable using them, uncomfortable with the scent of her skin afterwards as she towels herself dry, uncomfortable with the texture of the towel, which feels if anything too soft in its caresses, all things lent to her by Helena Aynslea, a woman who, until a few moments ago Hermione had taken an intense disliking to.

The conservatory is warm, lit pale with a grey winter light. The sky is a uniform overcast, the sea today is black. Rain patters steadily on the

glass.

Hermione sits in a towelling robe, her eyes trying not to take in her surroundings, while at the same time devouring them for clues. It's all very clean, no spots on Helena Aynslea for sure, but still overly dark and nicknacky. There's a plain glass topped table, deep cushioned cane furniture, a scent of polish. The table is bare but for a Post-it pad and a pen, which bears a single telephone number and the word Finn.

Hermione's heart sinks. Helena has Finn's number?

Helena is now dressed - tight blue jeans and a cotton top, obviously no bra. Is this a man thing, like comparing the size of their dongs? Look - my boobs are plainly bigger and more pointy than yours? I am the better earth mother, you are dried up and childless and a waste of space. The hair is brushed out and golden-floaty as she brings tea.

Hermione's heart is quaking.

That inner voice again, questioning, demanding, measuring: *'What the hell's the matter with you, Minnie?'*

"Feels better?" Helena's smile is a little tight, but well meant. She puts the tea on the table, gathers up the Post-it pad a little too quickly, slides it smoothly into the back pocket of her jeans.

"Thank you, yes."

Hermione can't take this in. Finn and Helena? No way! Slow down a bit, girl. But what else could that mean? That Helena has Finn's telephone number?

'Well, it might just mean nothing, Minnie!'

'And anyway so what? Why should I care?'

Helena sighs wistfully. "I would run too," she says.

"I'm sorry?"

"Like you. Running. But I have never done it, and it would kill me to start, yes?"

"Em,... I dunno. Just don't run far to begin with."

"Ah, this is sensible. But still unlikely." Helena sits, observes something in Hermione's expression, in her tone, something hostile - no, not hostile. What is it? Is it merely defensive then?

Kyle shuffles in wearing only his underpants, muttering something about being unable to find a pair of socks. He does a double take when he see's Hermione, blushes, covers an unfortunate morning bulge, and backs away, disappears to his room.

"Hi Kyle, darlin'."

"Morning, Hermione," he calls back.

Helena is laughing. "We get few visitors." Then she grows serious. "I worry for him, you know?"

"Kyle?" Hermione doesn't know what to say. She's spent two years in Carrickbar getting at best no more than a please and a thank you from the people here, same as Helena, apparently, and suddenly,... "But you're his mother, Helena. It's your job to worry."

"We both know he's not,... very bright."

"But he's a good lad. He has a heart of gold and he's honest, and more than anything he's trying his best. He'll find his way."

"You think? But really I see no future for him here. And the world beyond it is in chaos. I had thought England such a steady place, once. The world will cheat him. Hurt him. Always."

"Not with you around, Helena."

"But what when I am not around?"

Ah, that's a bit dark. It stalls Hermione's reply, makes her consider it more carefully. "I'm,... I mean, I'm sure that's a long way off. And by then Kyle will have a wife to look out for him."

"Wife? You think?"

"Why not? Helena, he's good looking. All right, he'll never work with his head, but,... well you know,... when the right girl comes along, surely,..."

Helena is intrigued. "You are Romantic?"

"Got to be."

"Not married then?"

"Was. Disaster. Wrong man."

"Hmm. Me too. I am not Romantic. I am pragmatist? Right word?"

Hermione shrugs, but thinks she knows what she means. "Did art at school, English not my strong point."

"Same with me. English, I mean. " She shakes her head. "I am learning this past twenty years. I say the word "fuck" too many times. Is rude word, but learn this too late. Now I can't get it out of my head. Is such an emotive word too. Best word in whole of English fucking language. Yes?"

Hermione's laughs. "Yes,... but it does get a bit overused."

"We should not be Romantic with men, I think."

"Oh?"

"Women are better living with other women. We want babies, then pick man from online. Sex only. Then show him door."

"Sounds like you've had it tougher even than me. I'm sorry."

"Pfft. No sorries. You have children, Hermione?"

Hermione thinks twice. Does a miscarriage count? Is that something she would want to share anyway with a woman who, for all of this cosy intimacy, may yet prove to be an enemy. "No," she says.

Helena reads the hesitation, draws her own conclusions, feels the peculiar urge to hug Hermione, blushes at the thought of it. Hermione reads the blush and is confused by it.

Both sip tea.

"So," says Helena. "Kyle does not work with his head?"

"Didn't mean it in a bad way, Helena. I can't work with my head neither."

"Then he will always be slave. Work with hands, and cheated, treated like dirt by bossy sour-bitch in shop for minimum slave wage."

"Ah, we're talking about Mrs Mackenzie, now?"

"I refuse to go there. Drive ten miles to town, sooner than set foot in Mackenzie's shop."

"Is Kyle not enjoying it?"

"For times being, yes. But Kyle is trusting Mrs Mackenzie is liking him. And why would she not? But she will cheat him, because this is her nature and it is Kyle's nature to be cheated. And it will hurt him."

"I'd give Kyle something myself, but,... "

Helena waves her hands, dismissive. "You cannot. I know this."

"You do? I rather thought you held it against me."

"Oh? Why?"

"Because I know I would, if Kyle were mine."

Hermione realises it's true, that since the day Kyle dropped off his CV with her, and she'd told him gently there was nothing, but to perhaps come back in the summer, while hoping he would forget by then or get fixed up elsewhere, that it was then she had begun to resent this woman, call her names, harbour petty jealousies.

'My aggression is defensive!'

'Minor revelation there, Minnie!'

'But the shameless tart is still shagging Finn!'

But Finn wouldn't, would he? Well why not - he's a man isn't he? And that makes him as big a liar as all the others. After all, just look at her. Why wouldn't he? If he’s ever sat where you're sitting now, Minnie, he's sure as hell already in love with Helena Aynslea. Indeed, of a

sudden, you appear to be a little bit in love with her yourself.

'Strange thought. Strike that from the record – nope too late, it's out there.'

'All right if not love then awe.'

Anyway, Finn wouldn't. Finn is married. Which also means he would never sleep with Hermione either.

'Glad we've sorted that one out.'

'Ouch.'

Dressed now. The rain has eased off and Hermione is slipping on her mittens at the door, ready to jog the short way back to the flat.

"Thanks for the tea, Helena. It was lovely. Let's do it again, soon."

"Hermione?"

"Hmm?"

Suddenly Helena is folding her in an embrace. Hermione freezes in surprise, but only for a moment. Her mittens find Helena's shoulders and her palms assume their contours, pressing gently. They are cheek to cheek. She is astonished to find that Helena is soft, and warm.

She jogs on, waves back awkwardly. Her rival in love wants also to be her best friend, her sister, or something.

Okay,... fine!

Chapter Nineteen

Helena Aynslea was easily the most beautiful and the best dressed woman in the restaurant. She was lightly made up, wearing a knee length frock all shimmery in shades of blue and oyster. Then there were substantial diamond stud ear-rings, and an incongruous necklace of cheaper appearance that bore the words MUM. She sat upright and elegant, enjoying every moment. This was her natural environment, thought Finn, and she did not get out much any more.

To his relief the restaurant was still reasonably good, the atmosphere relaxed, intimate. But forty minutes was a long way to drive with Helena not saying anything. Of course he'd wondered if she'd changed her mind about the whole thing, wondered if he'd been stupid in suggesting it, neither of them able to see at the time what Helena was seeing now - how awkward the whole thing was. Except, if he could find it within himself to be calm, it did not take long for the revelation to resurface, that being with Helena thrilled him. But then Finn had always made the mistake of simultaneously objectifying women, and then feeling guilty about it.

It was Carina who had taken him to task over this, telling him, contrary to his expectations, that to objectify women was fine, that if a woman spent an hour objectifying herself before stepping out with a man there was something wrong with her if she didn't expect him to objectify her too and to like what he saw, and to say so. But Finn would never say so. Not to Helena. To have said so would have pushed things a little too far, rendered this thus far innocent dinner-date a step closer towards an affair, a step towards at least an accusation of betrayal, that is if Kathleen ever found out.

Helena studied the menu for a long time, studied Finn also, sent the waiter away twice. Finn wondered if she was all right - if she understood the menu, if he should help out. Then she smiled. She couldn't help it. It was the tiniest, briefest flicker of a thing, but it told him at once she was playing with him, or at least letting him know everything was all right.

"I see you are not afraid of me this evening." she said. "I prefer it I think if you are unafraid of me. Others, I prefer it if they are afraid. But not you."

"Em,... well, thanks,... I think. But actually I'd be wise to be afraid. You know people, you said. Bad people. I could disappear without trace.

Wind up with my throat cut."

"Yes. I make bad joke. When people think I am Russian they think also I am mistress of corrupt politician, or spy, or property of gangster. But truly, I know nobody of importance, Finn. Why else you think I am still in Carrickbar. Pfft. You English, you are so racist."

"I know. We can be. I'm sorry about that. But we're also polite with it, I hope?"

"Not always. But then one never knows with politeness. Is it sincere? Or false? With you I think it is way of life, Finn. How you have survived so long with kind heart and politeness, I do not know."

But he had not, in fact, survived, had he?

After finally ordering, Finn felt the silence come between them again and though he knew by now he should have been easier with it, he felt uncomfortable, felt his collar too tight, and wished he had not worn a tie.

'For pity's sake, Finn, you're the only guy here wearing a tie.'

He recalled Kathleen saying this on their last dinner date, for her fortieth birthday, in fact – everything as perfect as he could make it, except for the fatal mistake of wearing the damned tie.

But he had wanted to dress well for Helena - his only suit, a clean shirt, and yes a tie - out of respect for her. And because he was old fashioned like that. Now though he was worried he looked like a grey old salaryman on a seedy junket with his PA.

'Guilty conscience, Finn?'

'Bit late for that.'

"Sorry, Helena. I never thought how this might look."

"Look? What is look like, please?"

"I mean, if we were seen,... out together."

She rippled her eyebrows playfully. "Well, I know how it would look to me. Also I am always assuming others are having better sex. But

relax. No one knows me here. You?"

"Em,.. unlikely. This isn't my neck of the woods at all."

"Listen, I already tell you. Husband permanently screwing around. I think I am excused dinner with gentleman on Birthday. You worry now being seen with mistress? With Fuck-buddy perhaps?"

Finn winced at Helena's repeated use of the 'f' word. "I wouldn't like Kathleen to have the excuse for thinking I've ever been,... unfaithful to her."

"There is smell of burning martyr in what you say. So tell me, which is worse, man who wants to have affair but does not, or man who does not want affair but gives in to moment of weakness?"

"I don't know. I suppose either is,... unfortunate. But there will be no weakening on my part, I assure you."

"Ah. Puritan. You are worst kind of lover. Passion of the moment, then whipping yourself afterwards with nettles." Helena raised her glass. "So, to Kathleen. We drink to her not finding out, about nothing."

Finn raised his fizzy water. "Happy Birthday."

"Yes, to that also." And then, after the entrees: "I like this hotel. They will have a room, do you think, for afterwards?" Finn spluttered obligingly, Helena laughed. "Oh, Finn, darling, you are so easy. I was joking."

He knew that - of course he knew that!

Following the main course, the waiter brought a small piece of cake, with a sparkler attached and set it down before a delighted Helena, then withdrew with a polite "Happy Birthday, Madam," to which Helena blushed deeply.

"Ah,... Finn, you told them?"

Yes, Finn had told them. He had guessed she would not mind the fuss, that for all of the prickly defences she wanted to be fussed over, and he realised with some surprise a part of him wanted nothing more than to make the effort - surprised because for years now he had failed miserably to remember Kathleen's birthday, or their wedding

anniversary, or even his own birthday for that matter.

Had it ever been different with Kathleen? He could not remember. Maybe a long time ago, before the children came, it had been better, a time when birthdays and anniversaries had been remembered and celebrated by cosy tete-a-tetes in hotel restaurants, like this. But then had come the time when he was being chastised for wearing a tie, for not living up to the dream, for being,... disappointing.

But before all that, what was it that had attracted Kathleen to him? Was it the suit, the second-hand BMW, the long hours he'd worked in the pursuit of financial accounting excellence? Was it that he'd given the impression of a man really going places, only to wake up one morning to find he'd arrived and did not like it much, that in fact there was nowhere to go for a man like him, a man who would sooner tinker with the innards of an old watch than turn up for work one more day.

The night was black, cold, and already a sheen of ice upon the carpark. Helena took his arm for steadiness in her heels as they walked back to the car.

Touching her, feeling her weight against him filled him with something, like air rushing back into a leaky balloon, and he felt strong and firm and sure again.

"Thank you, Finn."

"My pleasure."

And then, in the car as they drove home: "We will do the same for your birthday. Yes?"

Finn hesitated. "Okay."

"Ah, you think you will not be around by then?"

"I don't know."

"You will be with Kathleen?"

"No,.. I,... don't know."

"She knows you are here of course? Maybe she come fetch you, drag you home?"

Finn shook his head. Helena paused, lips parted. Finn caught her expression, a look of thinly veiled surprise and he hastened to add: "She knows I'm okay. Just not where I am."

"She beats you? This is why you hide from her?"

"What? No."

"Then why are you hiding? This is unmanly, Finn."

"Unmanly?" He supposed it was, and her words cut him. He did not want to appear unmanly in front of Helena. But she didn't know the whole truth - nobody did except him, and Carina. "You want the truth?"

"Sure - truth is always interesting, even if it is a lie."

"No lies. I want her to want me. I want her to want me enough to come and find me, and tell me she wants me."

"Ooh,.. you don't know women very well, darling. You run out on me like that? I make you wait long time, 'till hell freezes over maybe? Then I come cut off your balls with rusty scissors."

"I know that. I don't expect her to do it - I mean to come and find me. I mean how can she anyway if she's no idea where I am? I don't expect she's thinking about me much at all really."

"Careful, I smell the burning again."

"I'm sorry, Helena, I don't know what I'm doing here. No, wait, that's not true. I do. I'm hiding out from my life. When I was a kid I ran away from school. It was easy. I chose a playtime, waited until the guards weren't looking, then ran for it. They sent a girl after me, a good runner. She caught up with me after a mile or so and walked me back into captivity. I never stopped to think that even if I'd made it home, there was still no escape, that my parents would have walked me back just the same. I suppose that's what I'm doing here. Running and not thinking."

She looked at him, reading the set of his jaw, the tension in it. He was a broken man in some respects and deserving of gentleness. "Is different now though, Finn. No one will walk you back. And I will not give you away. For me Carrickbar is prison. For you escape. Strange,

yes? What do places mean when they can be read so many different ways?"

"I don't suppose they mean anything."

"I have been thinking about this. We can be lonely anywhere. It is only friends, lovers, touching others, that makes the difference between heaven and hell. You were lonely at school, before you ran?"

"Yes. You're a philosopher, and a psychic. Also probably right."

"No, listen. I am lonely too. But less lonely for being with you today. I hope you feel the same way. We are friends now, and therefore a little less,... desolate. You need me for anything, Finn, you have only to ask it."

Finn felt something then. It was a swelling in his breast, an admiration for Helena, a tenderness, perhaps even love, and for the first time since leaving home, perhaps even for a long time before then, he realised he had been happy in the company of another human being. Nothing had changed. His life was still a train wreck in slow motion, and Helena was right, it was because he had stopped touching people. He had sealed himself up tight. Only here, in this new life, where no one knew him, could he begin to open himself a little, open himself to strangers.

But it could only go so far. Even wining and dining a woman on her birthday could not be mistaken for the real thing, since this was not his real life, and he would have to abandon these people sooner or later. Yet to open himself to those he knew in his real life was impossible, for he had armed each one with the very means of his destruction, and trained them well in the use of it.

Helena smiled. "One more thing you should learn from your story of running away from school, Finn. Beware the intentions of women who are faster than you."

"True." Finn supposed they were talking about Helena now. "I guess the important thing is if they mean well. But I agree, it pays to be mindful of the risk."

"And are you? Mindful of it?"

"It's my second nature to be cautious." Except Finn knew it wasn't true.

When it came to women, he was more inclined to trust, and what's more Helena sensed it too. Could he trust her to mean well? In truth even Helena did not know.

"I have hurt many men, Finn. This I know,... and they deserved it. Rest assured if I hurt you, it will be an accident or on account of my own stupidity."

Back in Carrickbar, she invited him in for coffee. It was not yet late, and Kyle was watching Forest Gump, so Finn saw no danger in it. He sat with him to the film's end by which time Helena had already gone to bed, complaining of fatigue and an ache in her back, and it was Kyle who saw him out.

Kyle said nothing on the subject of Finn and his mother, though the boy had a right to be wondering, and teenage lads were apt to be a bit territorial about such things, except Kyle interpreted threats differently and saw no harm in Finn, saw no harm in anyone.

Finally, Finn pulled up outside the house on Elm street, found himself staring at his watch as if he expected it to tell him much more than the time. He'd chosen the Omega for the evening, easily the finest of his collection, estimated its age as mid-sixties. Estimated the average age of his entire collection as mid-sixties, give or take a few years.

Was it a coincidence he was born in 1965? Were these watches each an attempt to revive a part of himself, to get it ticking again?

Chapter Twenty

The skip had come the evening before and was bigger than Hermione had expected. But for the price of it, she's thinking, it's not as big as it should be. Nor did it look like it was going to be anywhere near big enough for the task in hand. By a miracle the weather has cleared to a wide sky sort of day, a pale blue, calm sea, but not much warmth in it.

Finn and Kyle work steadily with the crowbars Kyle found in the garage at home. Amid various creaks and groans they yank apart the rotten furniture, then manhandle it all to the skip. Hermione watches from behind her counter with a quiet amusement as Kyle hurls the stuff into the skip willy nilly, sending up a tremendous crashing sound which thrills him, while Finn seeks to gently instruct him into being more economical with the space. They shall get it all in, he explains, but only if no space is wasted, that things must be put in more carefully. Kyle nods enthusiastically, makes more of an effort.

Hermione wonders about Finn's children, about his wife, about him sleeping with Helena. She wonders if it's just a fling and if they'll both move on quickly once the novelty wears off. She regrets not making a more definite move on him sooner, feels angry with herself for thinking such a thing, for what use is a man, apart from breaking up old furniture?

Squinty comes in for his pies.

"Fuck's goin on out there then?"

"Just tidyin' up John."

"Should have asked me. How much did that skip cost? I could have got you one for nowt. Shifted it meself."

And wanted a feel of my tits in return, John. No thanks.

"Oh, you have a business to run John. Those two are men of leisure. As for the skip, I got a good deal on it."

"Not from Sharp Brothers. I know them two. Proper pair of scoundrels they are."

Like you're not, John?

"Well, it's done now. You want your pies warming?"

"Aye go on. And I'll ave a,... what's it yon Mr Fancy Pants drinks?"

"You mean Finn?" she chuckles. Mr Finbar Fancy Pants. She likes the ring of that, though it is a little unfair. He is delicate in his manners, a little precise, but also a very modest man. Fancy he is not, which is just as well if she's to stand a chance with him – except he's already chosen the overly fancy, knick-knacky, knicker-less - and bra-less - Helena Aynslea. "He seems to like Americano."

"And what's that then?"

"Just very strong coffee, John. He has it without milk, or sugar."

Squinty pulls a face. "Fuck's sake. Disgusting. I'll 'ave a cup of tea."

Mr Finbar Fancy Pants, and Mrs Helena no-knicks? How does that work? Or is she making more out of this than necessary? Is she so irrationally and so fatally attracted to the mysterious, married, Finbar Fancypants, she can't see straight? She imagines that from Helena's perspective, looking down on the proceedings of the day, it is Hermione whom Finbar is more likely shagging, for what else will inspire a man to work out in the freezing cold all day, shifting slimy rubbish? What else will inspire a man to do anything for a woman if it is not for the promise of a warm slide into her slippery places afterwards?

And Finn will do it. He will do anything she asks. She is certain of this.

So what has Helena asked of him in return?

She remembers again the post-it-note with his name and number on it, and the way Helena slid it snug into the back pocket of her jeans, snug against that peachy backside. Why do that? Why hide the fact of Finn's presence in her house? Was she the type to discretely cover evidence of their affair, or would she not seek to broadcast it? God knows, married or not Finn was a prize to be shouted from the rooftops, and Hermione had not taken Helena for the discrete type. But the fact remains, whether they had shagged or not, Helena had not wanted Hermione to know about it.

And that was weird.

Hermione looks out through the French Windows now. The patio

garden is clear - old chairs, tables, benches all gone. Kyle is even tackling the opportunist weeds, thrashing them flat with the crowbar, then dragging their broken forms into great spiky bundles of green for deposit in the skip. Occasionally he strikes the old flag floor, raising sparks. Finn looks on, looks at times anxious, urges caution in case Kyle should hurt himself, but takes care not to dent the lad's enjoyment. They look around, satisfied, shake hands, a day's work done, and the sun sinking to the yard arm, winter-fashion, by tea time. They'll be in in a minute for the promised egg and chips and hot chocolate, and Hermione does not know if she should be cool with Finn or not - Mr Finbar Fancy Pants Finucane, who may or may not be shagging Helena Aynslea.

No.

Not cool, Hermione.

Finn's a good man, and at the very least, he likes you.

Be yourself,

Or be at least,... warm.

Kyle eats ravenously. Finn nibbles, looks tired and cold, and distant, his hair sweaty, one of his knuckles is wrapped in tissue. She clears their plates, Kyle rushes off, has to be called back so she can give him his money. She returns to find Finn staring out into the dark, far-away eyes, lingering over his chocolate.

He looks up, finds her looking at him. "Sorry, you're wanting to close?"

She smiles, shakes her head. "Don't be daft, Finn."

She collects the first aid tin from the back room, sits down with him, gestures for his hand - the one with the skinned knuckle. He does not resist, does not brush away her solicitations. His hand is hot, she feels a sight tremor in it and an initial jolt as if he is unused to being touched. It eases slowly into her palm, relaxes into her. She dabs gently at the skinned knuckle, applies a clean dressing, tidies him up all neat again, tidies up the first aid box, tidies back her hair.

She gestures to the patio. "Thank you," she says. "It's made the world of difference."

"Those old flags are still a mess," he says.

Ah. Strictly business is it? Well, have it your way. I am a good fisher of men, Mr Finucane. "Do you think they should come up too?"

"No. They're stable enough. I'd put some weed matting down and some gravel on top."

"How much gravel?"

"About five tons."

"As much as that?"

"Maybe six. I did a bit of my garden about the same size at home. That's how much it took."

"Big garden, then?"

Finn nods.

"Lot of work?"

"The gravel? A day should do it. Let me know if you need any help."

"Okay, thanks. But I was meaning your garden, at home."

"Work? I suppose so, but I used to enjoy it, pottering about. Not much of a gardener though. No matter what I did, it always managed to look a bit shaggy, the planting a bit haphazard. Kathleen replaced me with a gardener. It looks great now."

Ah,... Kathleen is it?

"That's a nice watch," he says. "I have one similar."

Oh, unexpected tack into personal waters now? Okay, Hermione, follow him. Give a little tug on the line, see if you can reel him in a bit. "Was my dad's," she says.

"Ah. Not running though?"

She shakes her head. "Dunno. I don't wind it," she says.

Finn nods though he does not understand.

"Cos my dad's dead," she explains, then wishes she hadn't because that reveals altogether too much. She feels the line go slack in the silence between them.

Finn nods some more. "I collect them," he says, eventually. "Tinker with them, get them going. I've just realised though the watches are all about as old as me, that in a funny kind of way it's myself I'm tinkering with, myself I'm trying to keep going. Does that make sense?"

Ooh, now that's interesting. That's definitely an opening, and an invitation. She draws her chair a little closer to the table, leans forward on her elbows. "How long you been collecting then?"

Finn thinks. "Oh, not long really. Just since,... you know, things like the Internet and eBay and stuff."

And since your wife replaced you with a gardener?

"What does your wife do?"

Too nosey, Hermione? No, to Hell with it. Go for it, girl.

"Advertising, marketing, that sort of thing. Travels all over the world. Meetings, presentations, seminars,..."

He does not sound entirely proud of this distinction. It's almost as if he is tentatively revealing to her another wound. "Lot of money in that, is there?"

"Oh yes. Don't see much of her though. Away most weeks, sometimes weeks at time. America, Europe. China too, lately. She was away for six weeks that time."

"Nice."

Finn responds with a tight little smile.

No, not so nice then. Is that the measure of him? Neglected. Lonely.

"Children?"

Finn does not reach for his phone, for his family album. He simply

nods, then after a moment of reflection offers: "Couple of lads. Grown up now."

Hermione senses the reluctance. It feels like dragging great weights out of him, and she cannot drag them very far. "Flown the nest have they?"

Empty nest syndrome, perhaps? Kids gone, and suddenly alone with a wife you realise you no longer get along with.

"No. Still at home." He smiles. "I thought they might be married by now. Children of their own. I mean, I had at their age. Not their fault though - difficult for kids to get going now, jobs being how they are."

"Not,... working,... or anything?"

"They can't find anything in the graduate line, and won't do anything they feel is beneath them."

"Ah,..."

She thinks she sees something, feels something in his tone. Despair. Emptiness. Frustration. She pictures his sons as younger versions of himself, lying in bed until the afternoon, playing on their Playstations all night, keeping him awake, Finn bumping into them at every turn, his wife away a lot. Has he come here to find space, to find meaning? Or is it more simply that,... his sons have,... displaced him?

Now there's a story.

But he's not shagging Helena, not even for the fun of it. She's sure of that now, for there is no fun to be had in Helena, only drama and of a kind Hermione admits is beginning to intrigue her. And he as much as told her he was not looking for an affair. This man is in serious need of patching up before he's ready for anything like that.

He flexes his fingers, tests the dressing. "Thanks," he says.

"Oh,.. you know? Every little helps."

Chapter Twenty One

Finn had by now realised the girl he often saw jogging on the beach was Hermione. As Helena had said, she was a very fit and indeed a shapely woman, also youthful in her looks and, since it was the sin of all men to objectify women, Finn had of course noticed this and was embarrassed by it. He was embarrassed too by the reawakening of his liking for the objective facts of women, also by what he felt was his inadequacy in that department. And he was troubled too by the growing thought of an affair, and all the implications of weakness it implied. Because even though there was no danger of him pursuing an affair, he was realising for the first time he might actually have wanted one.

And what was it Helena had said that night? *Which is worse, a man who wants an affair but resists the temptation, or a man who does not want one, but succumbs in a moment of weakness?* He wanted tenderness. He wanted a woman's touch - yes, sexual, playful, erotic.

What was wrong with that?

Not with Hermione, though.

Strange how Helena should have suggested Hermione.

He felt closer to Helena, but they both knew Helena would destroy him, It was simply her nature.

Hermione was lovely, but she was only the symbol of his wants, and he already knew her in reality as a woman with her own life, her own needs and fears and ambitions. And besides, she seemed to him too clean and tidy a person to want her life messing up by a messy man. He remembered the way she'd wiped away all trace of the oily Squinty, wiped him from her counter and the chair he'd been sitting on. Perhaps she saw Finn the same way, a shaggy dog, dripping unsavoury wet onto her freshly scrubbed tiles.

Plus he was too old now, or rather he feared he was old enough for those days to be fading, the days when he could not only justifiably appreciate a woman's shape and appearance, but realistically aspire to her as well. He was what? Forty nine going on, going on fifty, going on sixty five? Surely it was not beyond the bounds of possibility - theoretically speaking of course - that he could aspire to a woman of Hermione's age and looks. Or Helena's? Male movie stars did it all the

time - men in their forties and fifties with a fresh young girl hanging on their arm, but he did not want a fresh young girl.

He wanted a woman.

Like Kathleen.

Or a woman not unlike Kathleen, but who bore the distinction of wanting him.

You mean Like Helena, Finn?

No,... she was too fearsome and pragmatic a creature. Helena, he imagined, like Kathleen, would scold him for tinkering with watches, for wasting his life in ways she could not comprehend. Someone like Hermione would, at the very least, leave him to it, provided he did not make too much mess. And all right, since we were talking hypothetically, it was fine to speculate on these things, to rummage through the emotions that spilled out of him when he was near these people, but he was still married. More than that he would not give Kathleen the satisfaction of sneering at the merest hint of betrayal, that he was having an affair, this of course in addition to his being outmanoeuvred by his sons. Also that he was, worst of all,..

Un-ambitious.

Ah, that one again, Finn: Your lack of ambition!

Sure, perhaps it was his lack of ambition that was the worst of all. She might have forgiven him any of the others, perhaps even an affair, had he only been able to maintain his trajectory.

All the way into the nut-house.

(Sorry Carina)

So,... he avoided the beach for once, strolling instead to the south of Carrickbar, past the harbour, where the little boats that morning were leaned at cocked angles in mud. It was appallingly early, first light after a sleepless night, and hopefully before even Hermione was out jogging, though why he wanted to avoid her, why this perpetual embarrassment whenever he saw her, he did not know.

Carrickbar was like two places at the same time. There was the low

tide version when the boats were beached and slouched, ungainly like this, in a misery of mud. And then there was the high tide version, when they bobbed high on a clean clear sea. On those occasions, he felt the sea rewarding him with a fullness, but one already dimmed by the certain knowledge it would soon be taken away again. First, it hid the mess of reality, of what lay underneath it, allowed Finn to dream the dream and smile a while. And then it would remind him of the low seething, glutinous wastes that underpinned everything.

You couldn't walk far.

South of the harbour, the estuary cuts in and the paths curl back upon themselves. There were trails that led out among the dendritic estuarine inlets, an incongruous landscape of close cropped green, on which white dots of sheep could be seen grazing, and come spring their young fatting into salt-lamb - about the only thing Carrickbar was known for these days. He walked as far as he could, found a lone bench dedicated to the lives of Bert and Elsie, and sat down.

It was a blue skied, low winter sun sort of day, and the air felt cold on his face after shaving the beard off last night. He'd been been growing the beard as a disguise for at least a decade, hiding his face from the people whose money he clawed back into the coffers of the budget gurus, hiding too his growing dissatisfaction from Kathleen. But was now the best time to be revealing his true face to the world?

He had begun his career apprenticed to the firm of Carwen and Davies, accountants in Liverpool. There, he had learned to count and make meticulous account of the comings and goings of money. And contrary to the popular image of the accountant, it had been a merry ship at Carwen and Davies, and he had enjoyed the work, dealing with the accounts of businesses, of enterprises, of churches, of clubs and charities. It had shown him a world of diverse occupation, always outward looking, striving, expanding towards the new.

But heaven help the world, old Carwen had told him, if the day should dawn when accountants were King, for they could only follow the logic of money, which was rather a cold business, and too easily reduced to penny pinching for profit. So let the people work, Carwen had said, and let us profit from the minding of their money. But perish the thought they should one day end up working for us, or they shall have to work for nothing, for what they might once have had we will already have taken it from them.

He tested the dressing on his knuckle, felt it pull tight, remembered the feel of Hermione's hands as she had bound him. There'd been a tenderness, and something deeply nurturing in the simple movements of her fingers, in the pressure of her hands.

Kathleen had never been like that. Always too brisk, too busy. She had always been hot, dynamic, leaving him breathless, and too often alone. They had conceived children between flights - long absences he had dreaded for weeks in advance, and endured stoically. Nowadays he did not know she was going until he saw the carry on bag being wheeled out of a morning, that she was wearing the better suit, the stockings, the perfume.

The text would come later, when she had touched down in New York or Paris or Rome, merely hinting at a return. The timetable was always to be kept flexible when personal things were concerned. The world of work was the priority. Her ability to always fit in with it, irrespective of personal inconvenience, was her passport to success, she said. More often he would assume it would be the weekends when he saw her, but more lately, not - the stop-overs in Singapore, Beijing, Hongkong, making for longer round trips. They might go weeks at a time and not see one another. And she had seemed,... to grow bored with him. But Finn was an adult, she said - he could look after himself. It was the boys who needed her, the boys to whom she devoted her personal time whenever she could spare any, the boys to whom she directed her 'love you' texts.

The boys who were men.

There came the crack of a gun out on the marsh, someone wild-fowling. He took a breath, tried to imagine Hermione jogging, imagined she had changed her route and by remarkable coincidence come jogging his way. She saw him, smiled, sat down to pass the time of day.

"Hi Finn, you all right, darlin'?"

West country! Her accent. He'd been trying to place it, the vowel sounds, the intonation. What was it, he wondered, that had brought her so far north? Or was it only he who felt this was the edge of the earth, well,... edge of England certainly.

His phone chimed. He was bidding on an AVIA Olympic, assumed the notification was warning him he'd been outbid, but his bid was safe. It

was a text from Carina.

"Hey Finn. Still okay? Don't lie. I'm your doctor."

"Bit flat 2day. Introspective. Not great place in winter. BTW, you not my doc. If so would consult doc more often."

"Is that all you have? You sickening? Half hearted attempt at flirting noted."

"Not flirting."

"Says you. Have leave coming up. Want me spend holiday with u ? Happy play docs if turn u on."

"Thanks 4 offer. Politely decline. Last thing man needs for woman trouble is another woman."

"Ha. Not wanting company then?"

"Shall go it alone bit longer."

"Shame."

"Health service not collapsed without me?"

"Who cares? FK health service. Me go NZ where I be respected MD. Or USA as rich private shrink. Many rich nutters these days. Easily parted from cash."

"U been goin NZ for years. You no go. All English r masochists. Always need something grumble bout."

"LOL. Mean it. Going."

"So take me with you. Happy play doctors with you in NZ,... or something."

"Hmm. Nice. Have many unconventional cures. In mean time, flirt with local talent, and masturbate."

"Blush."

"You will not go blind, or develop hairy palms. Trust me on this. Don't

dry up. Need you functional in plumbing department if we go to NZ."

"Typical doctor! As romantic as mud. But am taking your advice."

"Good also for prostate, something else 2 B careful of at ur age. And I can be romantic. How u bowels?"

"Not discussing bowels. Line drawn."

"Love life then? Shagged any natives?"

"Recently had dinner with old world imperious Russian beauty - Georgian actually. That do?"

"WTF! Having n affair?"

"Not affair. Friends."

"How old R U? 4 woman, male friend = lover in waiting. How long u staying thr? Now worried. Grrr."

"Said before, till money run out. Am I your friend then?"

"Answer requires essay and fudged conclusion. But u soon b married to Russian beauty. Damn."

"Georgian. And already married. She and me."

"Sorry 2B be blunt, lover in waiting, U not been married Kathleen long time. Heard anything from her?"

"Told you, closed those channels. U only one I'm letting in 4 now."

"Flattered."

"U forget was ur idea I came."

"And where is u, exactly?"

"Not saying."

"Okay, but speaking as ur doctor, and serious now for a moment, there is a problem with making friends in that life."

"I know. Only part of me is here. Therefore friends I make here are as unreal as people I know there. Except you."

"Not good friend. I crazy as u are."

"That's why I love you."

He hovered over the word love before sending. But to hell with it. Of course he loved Carina. All the male patients loved Carina, and maybe half the females too. How she coped with that he'd no idea, but she did.

And she was right, he could not stay in Carrickbar for ever, and once gone, he would never come back, so he could not take any relationship here seriously. Not Helena. Not Hermione. Not Kyle. And that was unfortunate, because already he cared about them, loved all of them, as he loved Carina. But this was not his life. The woman who had been his life was criss-crossing the world Business Class, meeting by meeting. And he did not want to let her go.

But if that was true, what the hell was he still doing here?

Chapter Twenty Two

A grey morning. Cold. It shrivels all scent, even of the sea, which has drawn back now for miles. Hermione is out later than usual, runs south for a change. For a while now she has alternated between hope and fear she will encounter Finn on the beach - hope that she might share one more trivial intimacy with him, and fear of the pain caused by common sense and the knowledge that trivial intimacies are all they can ever share.

So, she runs down by the harbour, to the estuary and begins to pound the little path that curls back inland. She runs by the bench dedicated to Bert and Elsie, imagines them sitting there, staring out to sea, wonders if they lived in Carrickbar all their lives, wonders what has happened to the world to make everything suddenly so transient, so temporary.

She's about to jog on but notices a wallet lying underneath the bench. She picks it up, flips it open. There's about a hundred in cash, a slew of plastic, mostly loyalty cards, but also a debit card, a credit card, and it belongs to,...

Mr F.J.Finucane.

She closes it with a snap as if bitten.

Finn's wallet!

He must have been sitting there. And right now, he must be having kittens, looking for it. She'd better take it round.

'No, wait, ring him.'

'Can't - phone is at the flat.'

'So ring him when you get back, ninny. Or why not post it?'

'What?'

'You heard me, stick it through his letter box. Or are you hoping to capitalise and suck up to him, claim perhaps the reward of his tickling your fancy in return?'

'Don't be filthy. I'll drop it through on the way back. It's nothing to get

worked up about. Gormless man!'
The estuary is vast, silver rivulets curling out to meet the retreating sea and sky. Tonight she's preparing the meal for Lionel and Finn, wants to impress, is planning her menu, her ingredients, the clothes she will wear for the brief moment when Finn might see her. Lionel will press her to stay, to eat with them, to chat afterwards perhaps, because Lionel is a sweetheart and wants to be her father. And she would let him, if he wasn't so unbearably pushy all the time. But she will not stay, wants only, she realises, to be near Finn for a little while, long enough for him to wonder and to want her more than he wants Helena.

Or his wife.

She moans at the stupidity of it.

'Get a grip, Hermione.'

And now she has his wallet. What is this if it is not divine providence? She pushes it deep into her leggings, feels it slide snug against her thigh, zips it in, safe, secure.

Finn's wallet.

It feels huge!

'Yes, yes,... all right.'
She jogs on, faster now, to clear her mind. There's a vehicle on the sand, miles out, tiny figures dotted around it. She doesn't often run this way, isn't sure there should be vehicles all the way out there at all. She pauses, breathless, hands on knees, stares out, wondering.

A gravelly voice comes growling low behind her. "Fucking foreigners."

It's Squinty, dressed in beige camo. He has a covered gun on his back, the hound held tight to heel on a piece of rope a good two inches thick. It sits paradoxically docile now, panting, a long string of drool hanging from blubbery lips. A blooded duck's head swings limp from his game bag. They've come up behind her, unheard because of the wind. She wonders how long they've been there, feels her bottom suddenly uncomfortably delineated in her leggings, feels his eyes all over it, like she's suddenly sitting in cold water.

'How long has he been staring at it?'

"Ooh! Made me jump, John. What foreigners is that then?"

He tips his head towards the horizon. "Gangs, out working the cockles," he says. "Slaves, good as."

"Slaves?"

"Illegals I'll bet. Droves of em. Working for pennies. Fucking Victorian it is."

"Is it safe? I mean, they seem a long ways out. And there's quicksands, int there?"

"Quicksands, aye. An' a tide faster 'n a man can run."

"They know what they're doing though?"

Squinty shrugs. "Likely they're chancing it at this hour. But there's plenty more where they come from."

"More what?"

"Foreigners, love. No end to 'em. And all wanting a piece of what we've got."

She shivers, pulls the hem of her jumper down to cover where John's eyes are lingering. She dislikes his overt ogling, finds it as repulsive as his racism. Neither surprise her. "Bad job for a cold morning like this," she says. "I mean grubbin' about in mud for cockles, poor souls. And all the way out there!"

"Aye, bad job all round." Squinty leaks a smile from the side of his mouth. "Never did show me that tattoo of yours."

"Well, enough said about that, John. So I'll be jogging on. All right? You'll be in later for your pies?"

He laughs. "Show you my gun too if you like while we're at it?"

"Eh? Oh,... I'm sure that's not legal just round here, John. I mean taking the cover off your gun. Not interested in guns, anyway."

Squinty laughs some more, enjoying her unease.

"Anyway, be seein' you John." She sprints away, a little too fast and winds herself but wants more distance between them, and as soon as possible, so keeps going though her heart will burst. She realises too late the double-entendre over the gun, feels unclean of a sudden, shudders. There's a roar in the wind as she climbs back towards the village. She thinks of the figures out on the sand where sea meets sky, wonders what would happen if the vehicle broke down or got stuck in mud, and the tide came in. Long time since there was a lifeboat at Carrickbar, and the men to crew it. Would anybody even notice? What would they do?

She's at the café, now, warm and showered and neat, and a dab of scent, and the open sign turned, and Finn's wallet on the counter. She's curious, so she sits and opens it again, slides out the plastic one by one, and the business cards, looking for clues to the truth of him. She finds the card with the stamp and the bit of "something" underneath, and that's interesting, and she's tempted to curl up one corner, but resists it. It's photographs she's looking for. Wife and kids, that sort of thing, but there's nothing. No clues to the life of Mr Finbar J Finucane.

Except,... Bingo.

Of a sort.

Driving license.

Name and address.
And he's from,... Aylesbury?

Where's Aylesbury? Consults Google Earth. *Fuck!* That's way down south! You're a long way from home, darlin'. Date of birth? Hmm,... doesn't look it. She copies the address onto a post-it note, slips it into her apron pocket, puts her coat on.

Better let him have it back.

Chapter Twenty Three

Channing House stood inland from Carrickbar. It was a villa of Victorian Gothic pedigree, stained windows and gravel driveway and with a view of the sea more at a remove than the seafront denizens of Carrickbar, for whom the sea was daily and often literally, in their face. Lionel met Finn at the dramatically creaky door with a smile, both men in tweeds. For a moment Lionel did not recognise him.

"Good Lord, Finn, you're a different fellow entirely."

"Sea air, Lionel."

"No,... beard man. Beard's gone! Come in, come in."

From the hallway, Finn could smell cooking, something heavy and winter-wholesome. It had his mouth watering. There were knobbled walking sticks in Chinese looking urns by the door, pictures of hunting scenes and a fake blunderbuss upon the wall. The place was heavy on detail, heavy on life, a long life.

Finn was relaxed, looking forward to a chat with Lionel, with another man, looking forward to making his acquaintance.

His mood was a far cry from that morning which had found him in a fluster, having thought he'd lost his wallet and turning the house upside down looking for it - not that there were many places a wallet could hide among Finn's spartan furnishings. By lunch time he'd feared the worst, feared he'd dropped it while out, and was determined to retrace his steps. So with coat and shoes in hand he'd come to the front door, only to find the wallet on the mat, and smelling strange. Well, not strange exactly, but definitely perfumed.

"You're right on time," said Lionel, bonhomie beaming from every line on his face. Finn could not decide if the guy was genuinely open and friendly or simply potty. Either was fine.

Lionel went on: "Walked up from the village, did you? Excellent. Means you can have a drink. You a whiskey man? I've been saving a bottle of something special for later on."

"Em,... I have been known to indulge. Thank you. Expensive stuff though these days."

"Spoken like an accountant."

"Well, I am an accountant. I mean was. Sort of. Knowing the cost of everything, the value of nothing. Isn't that what they say about us accountants?"

"Once an accountant, always an accountant. This area's short of a good one too. Have to travel bloody miles to see mine, and though he's a dear chap, he's a shameless rogue as well. Shouldn't be trusting him with anything, let alone my retirement egg."

"We can sometimes have a reputation for,... avarice. Not entirely unfounded, I'm afraid. But I haven't worked private practice for a long time."

Lionel looked thoughtful and Finn hoped he was not about to ask for professional advice. Accounts, money, that was something he'd hoped to be laying low from, at least for a while. Money was eating away at the corpse of the world, like maggots. Eating at him too. What happened when there was no flesh left to feed upon? Would the money eat itself?

Finn shuddered.

Dinner was daintily sculpted melon boats, followed by lamb with mash and a minted vegetable medley, straight out of a celebrity chef programme. The melon boats were waiting in the dining room, a room that boasted a garish Wilton carpet, also mahogany furnishings and fussy details in brass and finely worked glass.

Finn had wondered about the preparation of the meal, wondered if Lionel was so loaded he could afford staff. But all became clear when Hermione came in to remove the remains of the melon boats and to bring through the main course.

"Hi Finn."

Finn blushed. It was the suddenness of seeing her, unexpected, but always a pleasure. "Em,... hi."
"Working my debts off," she explained. "Lionel and I aren't married or anything. In case you were wondering. Or even seeing each other."

Lionel laughed. "More's the pity, my dear."

She smiled, looking directly at Finn. He thought she was about to say something else, perhaps about the lack of beard, but instead she turned, seeming flustered he thought, and left them to it. Finn caught the scent of her. Recognised it at once.

It was *her!*

She'd found his wallet; pushed it through the letter box. But why hadn't she said?

Don't be an idiot Finn. It could be a coincidence.

Either way he was grateful.

She'd saved him.

What every man needed was a woman like that.

Finn had not tasted lamb in a long time, had not tasted anything so good for even longer, so much so the first mouthful had him closing his eyes in appreciation. He could easily have wept. And Lionel, sensing this appreciation, in a low voice said: "Talented lady."

Finn sighed. "Yes."

"Make someone a lovely wife."

Finn was going to have to start wearing a badge on his lapel that said: "Married and not looking".

"If I may say so, Lionel, that's a very outdated thing to say."

"My generation I'm afraid. There are still some old fashioned girls, you know? Just as there are still old fashioned men."

"Well, I didn't marry one, that's for sure. As for me? Old fashioned? Maybe, at heart. But it's simply no longer permitted Lionel. And that's that."

Hermione wore understated waitressing clothes - black skirt, black blouse. Her lips were red tonight, not the black he'd encountered when he first met her. She asked, playfully, what "sirs" would like for dessert, that there was a choice between raspberries and ice cream and raspberries and ice cream. And later, when Finn and Lionel settled in

the sitting room, and Hermione had already washed the pots and put them away before either men had thought of the necessity, she popped her head around the door, fastening her coat in readiness, and said she would be going.

"Oh but do join us for a moment," said Lionel.

Finn's heart leaped at the possibility, but Lionel's invitation was squashed flat with a blunt look that Finn did not understand.

"Thank you, no," she said, and seeing the whiskey bottle and glasses already lined up, she raised an eyebrow and added. "I'll leave you men to put the world to rights. And to your 40% proof testosterone." Then, melting into a smile, she offered Finn a softer look. "Goodnight Finn. You take care, now, darlin'."

Did she just wink at him?

He was disturbed by something remembered from long ago, an odd, sweet swelling in his breast that he would have liked to linger upon, but Hermione was gone, and his attention was pulled back to the here and now by the squeaking of the cork as Lionel worked it from the bottle. There was something of an alarm in it.

"Guilty pleasures, eh?" said Lionel.

"Sorry?... Oh, the whiskey."

Finn accepted the glass and wondered at the twinkle in Lionel's eye. Was he some sort of big cheese around here? Or was he just a chatty old man with a posh accent, and lonely. He was a seeker of information, that's all Finn could say for sure, and was happy to bathe in the man's charm. But there was money here, in this house. And money bought influence. It bought loyalty, and wealthy contacts who also had influence. Sure, the wealth of Lionel, imagined or otherwise, was like ripples of influence spreading from the millpond that was Carrickbar, out into the wider world. Or was he, after all, just dirt poor and putting on a good show? Either way Finn would have to be careful not to allow the man's charm to completely disarm him, or his business would be the talk of Carrickbar.

"Lovely girl, that," said Lionel.

Blunderbus?

Yes, there was something rather unsubtle in Lionel's approach. Something of the scattergun, looking for a target on which to pin further dialogue, further probing.

"Hermione? Absolutely."

"A story there, I'm sure. Haven't worked it out yet."

"Em,..."

"You seem to get on?"

"Oh,... yes. She's very kind. Lovely."

Lionel's drag-line was deflected by Finn's sigh, swept away, lost purchase. He floundered for a moment, tried another approach."I'm very nosey of course," he said. "She calls me the biggest gossip in Carrickbar, and I suppose it's true, but then at my age it's really only the stories of people's lives that interest me."

Finn nodded, reminded himself once more to be careful. "She's not,... from round here? I detect west country tones."

"Yes. Spot on, old man. Came up a few years ago. Bought the café outright, they say. Inheritance. Been turning it round ever since, bit at a time. Ploughed everything she has into it. Doing a good job too, but she could do with a few more customers, especially out of season. The trouble with Carrickbar of course is it's not on the way to anywhere else. No one passes through, you see? You have to be curious about the place to want to come at all, and on bad days it inevitably,... well,... disappoints."

"True."

Lionel's generosity with information seemed designed to pressure Finn into being more open in return. But he had nothing on that scale to trade. Perhaps it was his turn to steer: "So,... what did you do, Lionel? I mean what line were you in?"

"Police inspector." Lionel chuckled. "Love watching people's reactions when I tell them that."

Finn allowed him a cautious smile. "Policeman, eh? Well, my

conscience is clear."

"Yes, in my professional opinion, I'd say it was, in the main. But I'd also say you were hiding something."

"We're all hiding something, Lionel. It's human nature." It was Carina who had taught him that.

"Now there,... your lack of denial is most telling. And your observation, of course, quite penetrating. And true. Although what's not true is the fact that I'm a police Inspector. I'm a writer actually. Tell stories. Used to be an English Teacher, local comprehensive. Gone now. Ghastly ruin on the road in - you might have noticed it. Now we have to bus the poor little buggers ten miles to an overcrowded, profit grabbing exam-factory in Weston."

Finn smiled at the provocative deception, then took in the aroma of the whiskey. Smokey, peaty, seductive. He took a sip. Smooth, nutty, then the fire, and a rush of pepper, of sweetness. It was not lost on him, nor the fact that this after-dinner chat was an interrogation of sorts. Should he commit then? Should he open up to this gossipy ex-teacher - now writer of fiction? Or play games with him?

Be like Helena! Weave your own myth, Finn.

"Well,"he said. "My story is it's a heart I've broken. Not the law."

"Ah,... on the run from love, eh?"

"On the run, yes, but not from love, more from life." *Keep it cryptic. That's the way.*

Lionel didn't flinch, slid instead gently into the mystery, into the game: "Still, you seem to be making friends here?"

"Yes."

"Even, dare I say it, melting the ice of the grand ice-maiden herself?"

"Who?"

"Helena Aynslea."

Finn blinked, but did not offer anything. The subject of Helena Aynslea

was a dangerous one. Helena was taboo, and Finn felt instinctively protective towards her.

"Kyle keeps my garden tidy," explained Lionel. "I'm afraid I mine him for information in exchange for chocolate digestives."

"Ah, then news of our affair is already public knowledge."

Teasing, Finn. Weave a fantasy for them. Helena would approve.

"Now, there you see? I detect the irony in your tone, and therefore don't believe you. Not entirely."

A bit of truth thrown in: "It was her birthday, Lionel. I took her out for dinner."

"Jolly decent of you."

"It was the gentlemanly thing to do."

"Very sensible too," he went on playfully. "I mean that you should stick to fizzy mineral water, when you had dinner, as you were driving. Clearly you are a man who is not a risk taker."

Finn felt a shudder. "Of course I'm curious how you know about the mineral water. As for the risk taking, I wouldn't be too sure."

"Nephew waits on at the hotel. Recognised Helena. I mean who wouldn't? A beauty like that! It's a small world, Finn. Information is everywhere. Sometimes, you don't even have to go looking for it."

Finn was about to take another sip of the whiskey, but noticed Lionel had yet to touch his. Lionel noticed him noticing, smiled guiltily, then took a generous gulp. "Good stuff, eh?"

"The best. You sure you weren't a police inspector?"

"I think I would have remembered if I were. No, English teacher by profession, frustrated novelist by ambition. Hope you don't mind my mentioning the Helena thing. Not my business of course. Hermione's right, I'm just too nosey. She's always telling me off over it."

So why mention it, Lionel?

He must have been well into his seventies, which meant he could have been retired from teaching getting on for twenty years.

Lionel smiled, inscrutable, as Finn tried to read him. So Finn talked about the health service and found some solace in that. And then he found his myth-making tending more towards truth, lubricated and anaesthetised into submission by the whiskey. He talked a little of Kathleen, in general terms, of her career, her long hours and longer absences, and of his children whose eternal presence dismayed him, made him question his abilities as a father. These were clichés, truths shared between him and many other middle agers. Nothing controversial there. Nothing very valuable in the gossip stakes.

"Children always find their way though, eh Finn?"

"So they say, but mine seem to have given up. They're living half-lives instead. Waiting for me and Kathleen to die, then they can live off their inheritance. But it won't last them long, and neither of them with any state pension or anything. So, what the hell are they going to do?"

Lionel thought for a moment. He appeared perplexed that he suddenly found himself holding the very confidence he had been fishing for. "Em,... surely, not your problem, old boy. They must find their own way. Anything you say to them will be misread as interference. And they'll only do the opposite."

"Sounds like you have kids, too?"

"A son. Had high hopes for him as well, like you. Bright lad, energetic. Wanted him to be a teacher."

"I take it he didn't?"

"Took off at eighteen on a world tour with a hopelessly undertalented rock band and a broken down van. Now he works in a bar on a beach in Spain. He's fifty. Doesn't own the bar or anything. Doesn't own much, actually. Not married. Long string of beautiful girlfriends, but none he can keep for longer than five minutes. Seems happy though."

"You get on?"

"Oh yes,... as soon as I stopped expecting anything from him."

Finn thought about this, felt a sympathy with Lionel's position, saw also

his son's point of view. "Neither of mine were particularly keen on following me into accountancy. Don't blame them. From the outside it can seem a very dry profession. As for getting on, I don't know. Everything they say seems to be taking the piss. Out of me. Their mother. The world. Everything.

"And they communicate endlessly with people, strangers - you know - online, social media and all that. Some they know, most they don't. Sorry Lionel, I understand your frustration, but at least your son had a plan, crazy as it might have seemed to you at the time. But he's flown the nest and is making way."

Lionel took another sip, nodded, settled back a little. "I realise that now of course. Didn't at the time. What about your father? What did he do?"

"Bank manager. Died when I was small. I don't think the job meant that much to him though. He never spoke badly of it but it was just a living for him. His only real ambition was to go home to Ireland one day. We came here on holiday once because the name reminded him of something Irish. Swore blind you could see Ireland from the promenade here. Sorry, Lionel, I don't know why I'm telling you this."

Lionel was only half listening though, still following a previous thread. "Perhaps," he said. "It's that we always want for our children what we're unable to achieve for ourselves. But there must come a point when children can no longer reasonably aspire beyond their parents. And that time is now, more than it ever was. So we should let them be happy, whatever that entails, because they shall never be rich."

"Good point, yet I don't see how they can be happy either, lying in bed till noon, growing fat on pot noodle and computer games."

Lionel laughed. Finn laughed, laughed out loud. "They drive me nuts, and they're like strangers in my house. My house, Lionel. And I have no space to call my own, nowhere to put anything down and expect it not to be disturbed. And they smoke,… weed in my Summer House. Like they think I wouldn't notice the smell."

"That can't be the only reason you came to Carrickbar though. Space? Wanting not to be disturbed."

"No. It was,... something was,... making me ill. I had to. I had to get away. It was,... a question of survival. I have this friend, from the hospital. Psychiatrist. She said I had a choice. Heart attack, stroke,

nervous breakdown. Or run. I ran."

Lionel nodded. "Hmm. You know there's a lot you have in common with Hermione."

"Oh?"

"Cloudy back story, can't get to the bottom of it. Flight to the very edge of England. But the difference is she's sinking roots. You can't. And because of that you must be careful."

"Careful?"

"Careful of Helena, especially."

Oh? A warning shot? This was sudden. And unexpected. "Honestly, I've no interest in her, Lionel. Not in that way. It was just a night out, for her birthday. I felt,..."

"Sorry for her?"

"Yes. And why not? You called her the ice queen, and I can see where that comes from. But she's vulnerable, and a good person. Also perhaps a little desperate in her circumstances, and desperation can sometimes make even good people do desperate things."

"And that's where the danger lies, Finn. At some point you'll be wanting to go back to your former life, patch things over with your wife, deliver the bombshell your children need to get them off their arses. But Helena could destroy all that."

"How so?"

"Isn't it obvious? She's only to decide she wants you. And if she does, there's nothing you can do about it. You're a sympathetic chap, and maybe she needs a bit of sympathy, but she's not the type to be able to handle it properly. She needs a more robust kind of man for company. A man like you, or me? She'd crush us and not even know she was doing it, and all that after first laying waste to our former lives so there was no way back for us."

"I'm aware of that."

"Are you? I'm an old man Finn. Seen a lot. Seen a lot of sad stories in

my time and I know only too well that where women are concerned even sensible chaps are prone to losing their heads."

Finn sat back, observed Lionel for a while, the twinkle in his eye, the friendly fatherly softness of his face, wondered why he was not taking offence at this lecture. Whisky of course. "What kind of stories do you write, Lionel?"

"Oh, relationships, love, the drama of life. I'll probably write yours, with your permission, if I can ever get to the bottom of it."

Finn laughed. "No one would believe it. And anyway too dull. And who cares? Is there much money in that? Writing I mean?"

"Not a bean. Publishing's dead now for all but a few chosen ones. I put them all up online. Give them away. No one can publish a novel these days, but I don't need to. I have a decent pension. Savings. Investments. I get by."

Finn nodded. "The story of me and Helena Aynslea? Wouldn't be much to write."

"In itself, as a story of isolation, perhaps so, but we are always part of a bigger picture, Finn. There's you and your wife, your children. There's you and Hermione. You and me. You and your psychiatrist friend. They all interlink, through you."

"But surely I get a say in my own story. And what I say is I'm not interested in Helena, or Hermione. Getting involved with another woman would only complicate what's wrong with my life. I'm still married, and I want to stay that way."

"Man to man, Finn? Your marriage, and the life you lead around it sounds complicated. Sounds like holding it together is complicated. But, hypothetically speaking, and as an author of course, maybe another woman would simplify things."

"Oh? How so?"

"She'd be like a breath of fresh air. And then you'd wonder why you were bothering holding it together at all."

"For a time, probably, yes. But then what? I'd just wind up turning around, looking back and realising I was no better off. I've thought this

through, Lionel. I just need to be on my own for a bit."

Perhaps other men were not as self aware, thought Finn. But he had indeed worked through all these scenarios, at length, in bed at night, alone, Kathleen in some far flung corner of the world, the lads stomping around the house at 3:00 am. He did not want another woman. He wanted Kathleen. The question was did she want him? And if he really wanted to know the answer to that, why didn't he peel the postage stamp off his old SIM card, slot it back into his phone and find out? He took a pull at the whiskey, settled it back as the fire filled his mouth, swallowed it down.

Writer eh?

Finn supposed that from such a man's perspective his story might be interesting. He might even make a better job of telling it than himself, tidy it up around the edges, pull a happy ending out of the hat against all odds. "You're not really thinking of writing any of this down, are you Lionel?"

"Ah,... well, I would never actually borrow from those close to me, Finn."

"I'm glad to hear it."

Lionel reached over with the bottle, topped him up. "At least not without embellishing their telling of it into a form they'd never recognise."

Chapter Twenty Four

A foul night. Heavy rain rattling at the window and continuing through until dawn. It's Wednesday. Hermione lies still, cuddling the pillow, not wanting to disturb the delicious warmth of the duvet which has by now settled just right, and ever so sleepy-snug. No need to get up this morning, the cafe is closed. It might as well have been closed yesterday as well for all the custom she attracted. Things will have to pick up soon or she'll be thinking she's failed, that she will have to go home and listen to her mother say I told you so.

She remembers her mother is dead, that she has no home beyond the one she's sleeping in now, feels empty, lonely, angry.

Seven thirty am, then eight, then nine, and still she lies there, drifting in and out of dreams.

There's a yellow post-it-note fixed to the alarm. It bears the name, address and date of birth of a man she does not really know. He looks different without his beard, so much better, so much more readable, the softness in his eyes repeated about the corners of his mouth when he speaks. What did he say? "Oh, hi,..." or something like that. Not much in one sense, but a lot more in another because sometimes it is not so much the number of words that conveys meaning of course as the expression behind them - which with Finn is always,... lovely.

She blushes when she sees him, notices his blushes when he sees her. Or does she imagine that?

It means something.

Hush Minnie.

It's nothing, remember?

She'll run as usual today, but only when it's stopped raining.

It's rained a lot in Carrickbar this year.

The tide has turned by mid morning and is inching its way back in. Hermione jogs while the cold and the wind washes the sleep from her eyes with salt tears. She runs north, keeping to the sands, wanting to avoid everyone, Finn and Helena especially - Finn because she does not want to want him, and Helena because she does not want her to

want him either. And while she thinks on this, she wants only to be a lone figure in the grey. Jogging.

She's not gone a hundred yards when she spots something washed up, brought in by that morning's tide. It's a seal perhaps. Or a sack of something floatable tipped over the side of a boat. She would give it a wide birth but something in the shape of it draws her eye, something deep within that gives warning, primeval in its certainty, and she just knows.

"God, no!"

She jogs closer, slows when she sees the form a young woman, lifeless, topless like a mermaid, hair matted like weedy fronds about her face, arms outstretched in the sand where the tide has rolled her, a finger pointing. The waxy whiteness of her skin is beautiful, as in a way is the unnatural whiteness of her lips. Hermione stops, hands on knees, silent as a church, unbelieving.

What to do?

She takes the girl's wrist between her fingers, thinks to feel for a pulse. The girl is cold, wet, slippery like fish. The deadness in her is obvious.

Someone else is coming now. Running. Breathless.

She turns.

"Finn?"

"I thought I saw from the promenade. I wasn't sure,... is she?..."

Hermione nods. No need to make a show with CPR. The girl's spirit is long gone. Gone last night in the deep. Gone for ever.

She's not sure she wants Finn there, not sure why, not sure about anything just now. It complicates the moment, adds tangents to it that she cannot follow for meaning. She's also breathing strangely, too deep, like there's a scream inside of her that's trying, but won't come. And the tide is on its way back in.

Finn is calling the police on his mobile. He tries to be calm, precise, measured, but Hermione detects the quiver in his voice of a deep, trembling shock.

"Yes, a body. On the beach. At Carrickbar. Young woman. Girl. Drowned maybe."

She thinks it's taking him a long time to get the message across. He's fighting against an inappropriately cold pedantry. They want his name and address. There are other seemingly irrelevant questions. He keeps trying to tell them: A body. Yes. A body on the beach at Carrickbar. He breaks the call in frustration.

"What they say?"

"Not to touch her. Someone will be with us soon."

Hermione drops the girl's wrist. "How soon?"

"Don't know."

"But the tide's coming in. It'll have her back out if we wait. We can't let it take her back out, Finn. We can't!" She grabs hold of the girl's wrist again as if to prevent the tide from having her.

Finn is thinking, eyes to the sea, eyes to the promenade and the high water mark. He takes off his coat and drapes it over the girl's body, covers her breasts, as if to keep her warm. "We'll stay 'till they come," he says. "Move her up the beach if we have to."

Hermione nods. He's a good thinker in a crisis.

Tick.

They begin to shiver.

It's a full half hour before they hear the whine of the air ambulance. Blue lights appear on the promenade at the same time. A long time. Perhaps they have forgotten, like everyone else, where Carrickbar is. Hermione cannot remember those thirty minutes. Time is erased. There's just Finn, crouching by the girl, keeping quiet vigil, and she beside him, the pair of them willing back the tide. No one else from the village comes. It's too cold a day to be out.

Then, after an eternity, the police are there. She and Finn are led aside as if caught trespassing. The girl is taken from their care and they are resentful of it. Hermione has a parting image of her being rolled without

ceremony onto a plastic sheet. Finn's coat is sealed in a bag as if accused. Police and noise descend upon the quiet.

Someone is questioning Hermione now. She remembers a fluorescent jacket and a broken nose. She shrugs him off. "We'll be up the cafe," she says, gestures vaguely in the direction of the Sea View, then takes Finn's hand, pulls him from a pair of officers, leads him away, brushes off their objections. "We're cold," she snaps. There's a contempt in her voice. She can't help it. She hates the sight of them.

Bastards!

"They took your coat," she says.

They're climbing the steps by the harbour. Hermione is still holding his hand, holding it tight, can't let it go, and his hand feels firm and warm in hers. And she needs it.

"It's just an old coat," says Finn. "It doesn't matter."

"Hadn't you nothing in your pockets?"

He shrugs. "Nothing important. A hanky. An old hat."

"Not your wallet then?"

"Em,... no."

"Need to take better care of that."

"Yes,... look, about,... about my wallet,... thanks."

"Oh?"

"It was you who found it, wasn't it? You posted it through the letter box? Yesterday?"

This gives her pause. "How 'd you know?"

"I could,... smell your perfume on it."

She's impressed he knows her scent, impressed he noticed. "Must have had some on my fingers."

"But,... anyway,... thanks."

"It's all right."

They're on the promenade now, Squinty Mulligan's garage across the road, and him outside looking nervous at all the flashing lights. Hermione squeezes Finn's hand in both her own. Let squinty see. Let Squinty think I'm with Finn.

"You okay?" she asks.

"Yes. Still can't believe this is happening? Are we dreaming?"

"If we are it's time we woke up."

"Who was she, do you think?"

She recalls yesterday, the figures way out on the sands. "Dunno," she says. "Not from round here, though."

Finn looks out over the sea wall, back up the beach from where they've come. They are carrying the girl safe from the tide now, laying her down again. There's the lightning flash from a camera. A private ambulance cruises quiet to the kerb. Hermione feels him far away. They are both of them still down on the beach, with the girl, an eternal half hour of shivering vigil. Hermione tugs him up the hill towards the cafe.

It's warmer inside, but not much because the heating doesn't run downstairs on Wednesdays. It'll be warmer in the flat of course, but she's not going to invite him up there. It may be perverse but she's realising there's nothing like the closeness of death for making her want to feel alive, and if Finn feels half way the same, it'll only take a knowing glance on his part, and she'll have him, and be done with it.

They are shivering over hot chocolate when the plain clothes men arrive, ties at half mast and dark trench coats with collars turned, as if in parody of themselves. She notices Squinty at the door, trying to catch her eye. His way is barred by uniforms.

The questions begin in earnest.

She tells them nothing. Knows nothing. Spits her answers.

Finn looks on, wondering, bracing himself at her barely concealed contempt, is puzzled by it. His own tone is polite, respectful. But he knows no more than she. There was a body on the beach. He called the police. No, he does not know who she is, has not seen her around the village before. No, he saw no one else that morning, except Hermione. Yes, he lives in Carrickbar.

Squinty is still at the door, nose against the glass. The officers have finished, seem unperturbed by Hermione's tone, satisfied with Finn. They have addresses, have handed out cards with official police contact numbers on them. She tears the cards in two as soon as the police have gone.

But she and Finn cannot sit here now, not downstairs in the cafe with Squinty at the door. He'll want in. He'll want the gossip, for nothing like this has happened in Carrickbar before. But she can't share it yet, and especially not with him. The breaths are coming deep again, the scream building. She can't let go of Finn. Not yet. Something happened on the sands and they need to emerge from it intact, and they must do it together. She needs him to help make sense of it, fill the gaps in her leaking cognition. And whether he likes it or not, he needs her.

"Will you,... come up for a bit?"

Finn thinks on this for a moment, then nods.

Chapter Twenty Five

The flat was warm and white and sparsely furnished. There was a sofa, big screen TV, some lamps, a plain carpet - new, maroon and soft. And there was a scent - her scent. It embraced him, filled him, energised him.

The main light by day came from the big window overlooking the sea, and from which the room took its mood which, just then, was sombre. Finn was drawn to the window. It was arched, quartered, Victorian glass now run to lend a crinkled, shifting impression of the world beyond.

He stared out while he waited for Hermione to settle. There'd been an awkwardness as they'd climbed the stairs, and he'd been unable to suppress the feeling they were like lovers approaching their first time. He thought to give her some space, his back turned so she had not the added pressure of trying to read him - not that he could allow her to read him, for then she might discover the truth of him, that something in her spirit disarmed him, and had him wanting her.

And in wanting her, of course, he realised he no longer wanted Kathleen. He did not want to return to his old life. He wanted to break it, to start again with something new and fresh and wholesome.

Like Hermione.

But supposing for a moment any of that was true, and not just a vague sense of want muddled up with shock, Finn rejected it, and why? Because this woman was succeeding, like Kathleen was succeeding, just in a different kind of way. She had come up from the mud, porcelain pale but perfect, and he would not fracture her with his needs, because he had failed and was failing still to make any sense of his life.

The tide was well in now, the beach washed clean, the air ambulance gone. He tried to see if there was anyone on the promenade, but couldn't get a view of it. He supposed it was as well to be indoors, avoiding the noses and the questions of Carrickbar. Let the dust settle. Let there be a dignified pause.

He sighed.

When he turned back into the room, she was on the sofa, knees drawn

up, head in her hands, watching him.

"I keep seeing her," she said.

"Me too." He was haunted by it, shivered, felt useless. "I wonder who she was. She didn't look,... like she'd been in the sea very long."

"There were people out in the estuary yesterday, working the cockle-beds. Squinty saw 'em too, said they were probably illegals. Like slaves, you know? I was afraid for 'em. Was it a premonition, do you think?"

"I don't know. You,... didn't say anything about the cockle beds to the police."

Hermione glanced away. "I wasn't sure it's relevant."

"Suppose they'll ask around anyway."

"I thought most of those poor souls were from the far east, or Africa. This girl looked white, European."

"A lot come from eastern Europe now."

"They do?"

"I thought you were very,... sharp with the police."

"Couldn't help that. Long story. Sorry."

Nor was she afraid of them, he thought. He sensed something in her, something angry, something of the energy that protected her. Best to alter course, then. He turned back to the window. "Great view," he said.

No reply.

"Is it true you can see all the way to Ireland from here?"

"Who told you that?"

"Just something I heard once."

"Well, no. Ireland's a long way. Sometimes you can see the Isle of

Man. See it plain as day. But mostly you can't see that either." And then: "Never seen a dead body, before. You?"

"No."

"She looked so pretty, Finn. Didn't you think she was pretty?"

"Yes. And young. Very young."

"What's it like to drown, do you think? Must be the most terrifying thing."

He turned back into the room to find her hugging herself, trembling. There was a Chenille throw over the back of the sofa. He took it up and draped it around her shoulders, knelt down before her as he folded it snug to keep her warm. It reminded him of his gesture with the coat, covering the girl, trying to preserve something in her, even if it was only her dignity.

Hermione accepted the wrap, curled up, snuggling deep inside of it, her lips tense, biting something back. Finn wondered if she wanted to cry, wondered if he was in the way. "I'll go," he said.

She smiled a little. "Please, stay a bit longer. Sit with me. Talk to me. Talk to me Finn. Tell me the story of your life. Tell me what the fuck you're doing in Carrickbar."

He perched on the edge of the sofa. It was the one thing he'd not thought of, coming to such a quiet place as this, that anyone would want to know his story. Everyone here had to have a story though, even if it wasn't true. But it had to be something at least that explained them. Back home, nobody gave a damn. He hesitated, remembering last night with Lionel and how he'd probably already said enough to have the gossip reaching all the way back to Aylesbury. "Not much to tell," he said.

"Shagged Helena yet?"

"What?"

He laughed.

Hermione laughed, waited pointedly for his answer.

"No," he said "It was just dinner." Finn was assuming by now the whole of Carrickbar had heard about that. He was wrong.

Hermione caught her breath. "Oh,... dinner was it?" But dinner is close to sex, she was thinking. Dinner is foreplay.

"It was her birthday. And she seemed,... a bit down. So I,... I took her out to dinner."

"Ah. I've seen that side of her too. The down-ness, a hint of vulnerability beneath the granite. How could you resist? Sorry, Finn. I'm only teasing. Not my business."

"I do like her. I like Kyle too, and Lionel,... and I like you. You've all helped me settle in here. But I'm not,... you know,... *with* Helena. Things are complicated with me. It just wouldn't be right for me to get involved with anyone in,... you know,... that way."

"Okay, like I said, none of my business. Not my business either what you're doing here in Carrickbar, but that doesn't mean I'm not curious."

"I suppose I'm trying to start again."

"Oh?"

"But without having quite finished off my other life. Not properly, I mean. Not sure I want to, or even if I should. All I know is I needed to escape it for a bit."

"You in trouble?"

"A bit. Nothing illegal - just your usual middle aged marital muddle. What about you? What are you doing here? You're from Devon? Dorset?"

She nodded. "Devon. Little seaside town like this, only warmer and less wet. I'm doing the same as you. Sept I've finished with my old life. Clean break. This is the new Minnie."

Finn tried to read her, drew a blank. "Do you think we'll ever find out who she was?"

"Doubt it. They won't tell us."
"Maybe we should have mentioned it, I mean,... about the people you

saw."

She shook her head firmly, chin tucked in, defiant. "Telling them nothing."

Then, without preamble, she jumped right in, told him her husband's name was Brian. "Haven't seen him in long time," she added. "Not a good sort as it turned out. I mean 'part from the shagging around and all that. He was into drugs - dealing, I mean. Got me arrested one night, cos they thought I must be in on it too and could grass him up. Told them I knew nothing, 'cos I didn't. I mean, it was the truth. I knew nothing about any of it. So I spent the night in a lock-up. Suppose they were trying to frighten me. It worked. I lost,..."

Finn caught the hook. "Lost?"

"Baby. Lost my baby that night."

Finn felt the opening then, felt it yawning wide, felt the depth in her and a hint of the hurt she'd been carrying for a long time. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I understand now. I wouldn't have told them anything either."

She let slip a smile. Caught his hand for a moment, let it go. "Makes my name sound so stupid, way you say it."

"Sorry?"

"Just call me Min, eh?"

"Okay. Min."

"Better." Then she slipped the Paul Jobin from her wrist, and her hands were trembling when she passed it to him. And seeing his puzzlement: "Other part of me's here," she said. "This watch. There's a story in it. This is mostly why I left home."

He felt the watch in his fingers, the soft leather strap, warm from her body, the same heat permeating the case.

"Turn it over," she said.

The back was engraved with the name of a man: Richard Watts, Headmaster, Little Tavistow C of E Primary School. In recognition of

long service and dedication,...

"That was before," she said.

"Before?"

"Before he was ruined and everyone lost faith in him. Including me. And I've never told anyone this before Finbar, so God help me but I'm trusting you with my life, because after what I've seen today I have to trust someone with it."

"Min?..."

"I mean if I wash up suddenly on a beach one day, I want someone knowing the whole of me. I mean instead of knowing nothing, like,.. like we know nothing about her."

"Okay."

"He'd not been retired a year when someone made,.... accusations. You know, filthy stuff. A child, a child at the school. Police were all over it. Turned our lives upside down. And then the papers got hold of it And even my mother believed those awful stories. Me? I wasn't sure. I'd just married Brian. Brian thought he was guilty, but then Brian was a shit and thought everyone was as bad as him. Turned out he wasn't guilty at all. It was all made up. But it was too late by then, see?

"My dad felt ashamed, ruined all the same. The police didn't say he was innocent neither. They never said it. Never said sorry. Never do. Not for that, not for my baby neither. They only said they'd insufficient evidence to charge him. Meaning they'd nothin',.... cos there was nothin'. Cos my dad was innocent. And a good man. And ruined. His whole life fuckin' ruined. And we'd all let him down. And then one morning, I mean afterwards,... Mum found him in the garage, engine running. You know?"

Finn was numb and slow to answer. The day had completely pulled the wits from him now, overlaid him with a shroud of strangeness. "This is a fine watch, Min," he said, "You should wind it. Let it run. Wear it." He gave it back to her. "And about your Dad. You do know it wasn't your fault, don't you?"

She nodded. "But if he'd known just one person believed in him, Finn. He might,..."

He could see what she was saying and,... sure,... he might. "But it wasn't your fault."

Finn wanted her to weep. He didn't want her stoking it up this way, grief upon grief. Had she ever wept this out? She was looking around, eyes sharpening by the second, something inside, coming. But not tears. It was more of that energy that protected her, that made her shine. She took a breath held it for a long time. Let it go. Brightened. "So," she said. "You're not shagging Helena then?"

Finn laughed. "No. Definitely not!"

"Wouldn't blame you. Might shag her myself if I was a man,... I mean. Well,... take a brave man though. Woman like that."

"Well, I'm not. Not brave enough, I mean. And even if I was, it wouldn't be a good idea. And I've already had this lecture from Lionel."

Hermione fastened the watch back on her wrist, but did not wind it. "Lionel's a sweetheart. Very nosey, but means well."

"I know. I enjoyed dinner with him. Did you know he's a writer? Probably writing the story of all our lives."

"Writer? Yes. It's a hobby thing. You men and your hobbies. Hope you were careful what you told him."

"I was careful. And the food was great, thanks to you. "

She joined in with his smile. "You were early. The deal was you weren't supposed to know it was me who cooked it."

There came the sudden sound of traffic on the promenade road, so they moved through to the kitchenette which had a view of the street. From here, they could see the police and ambulance had gone, replaced now by a couple of vans from various news channels, and there were men prowling with overlarge cameras, and not much to look at. The King George provided shelter for them, and there now stood a huddle around the door, pint glasses in hand. Occasionally they would look across at the cafe, or they would accost a passing local and quiz them for snippets.

Finn took a step back, seeking the shadows. The last thing he wanted

was his face on TV. They were probably local news hacks, but he couldn't take the risk that one of their reports would get lucky and hit the nationals. It depended, he supposed, on how newsworthy an isolated drowning was these days. Not much. He was probably worrying over nothing.

"Looks like they're settling in for a bit," said Hermione. She kept to the side of the window, peering through the net curtain, intrigued by Finn's reluctance. "It's okay. They can't see you. We're safe."

"Is there a way out the back - I mean to the beach?"

"Steps down from the patio - you've seen 'em. Gates all rusted shut and that, but you might be able to work it loose. Might be able to sneak you out after dark that way. Cut along the beach, then you can come up by the harbour. Worth a chance, you think?"

But that meant spending the entire afternoon in her flat. "Sorry Min. I didn't mean to impose on you this way."

"No problem. It was me invited you up. Me should be sorry for getting you trapped here, seein' as you're so camera shy."

"Worse places to be trapped I suppose."

"I'll take that kindly. But listen, would it be so bad?" she said. "I mean if they found out?"

"Who?"

"Whoever you're runnin' from."

"I,... I'm just not ready for anyone to know where I am. Not yet. It's nothing bad. Nothing illegal. Not that sort of trouble. Just,.. "

"I know, you said. But if it's not so bad as that then can't you just face it? Mend it or break it, whatever it is. Cos the sooner you do, the sooner you can get on with livin' your life. Anyway, it's no bother - you bein' here. I'll make us some lunch."

Finn sat down at her breakfast bar and thought about it as Hermione rattled the crockery. What would that be like, he wondered, to continue living? She was right of course; all he'd done was put things on hold, and at some point life would have to resume - real life that is. But

where and how? Would it count as living if he stayed here, in Carrickbar? What kind of life would that be? He had chosen the place for its smallness, its remoteness, for it's eminence as a hiding hole, but it would require a significant shift to render the place big enough in his mind to actually live here. And do what? Mend watches for a hobby?

He only had money for a couple of years at most, remember? Longer than that and he'd need the share of a divorce settlement to keep him going. And he was too much of a coward to even think about that just now. And Carrickbar was the sort of place you washed up in when all was lost, like the girl this morning. It was not the sort of place you came to live,... more to die. And what was it Hermione had said? You couldn't see all the way to Ireland at all, only the Isle of Man, and that was hardly the same thing, and even that you couldn't see most of the time. It was a place forsaken, golden only in his memory.

What the hell was he doing here?

Same as her, she'd said. Same as Hermione

Except he wasn't, was he?

The Sea View held out against the bleakness of winter. It was modern, homely and white painted, like a beacon of summer, pulling back those memories and healing the spirit. Hermione sat beside him, putting on a smile, sandwiches on plates. Life had given her a good kicking - no doubting that. Not everyone survived what she'd been through. Carina had sometimes spoken of the tragedies clouding other lives, and how it was often easier to assume the mantle of "victim", let it colour your life thereafter than make the effort to truly heal. Hermione was making the effort. As for him there seemed little chance of emerging smiling from Carrickbar - only prolonging the uncertainty.

He had to break it, like she said. Go home and break it. Divorce.

Would that be so awful? Why was he afraid of it?

Carina had said it would kill him.

But that was before. And it was clearly coming.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Hmm?" He looked up to find her looking at him and for a moment he

fell into her eyes. Her eyes were wide of a sudden and eaten up with black, and she held herself powerfully erect - shoulders back, chest out. But this was not the provocative haughtiness of Helena Aynslea. This was another kind of energy. And he fancied he understood the message implicit in her demeanour, that she wanted him. It was clear as the look in her eyes and the tingle in his bones.

Because he wanted her too.

"Hours before dark," she said. Her words seemed filled with meaning, as seemed her hand pressed briefly to his. Let's go to bed, she was saying. But he was imagining it. Wasn't he?

"Yes." A quiver in his voice. "Em,..."

"It doesn't have to mean anything, you know?"

"What doesn't?"

Such moments are gossamer thin, and he'd broken it. Her eyes flickered, fluttered away, disappointed butterflies. "Nothing," she said.

He thought on this, asked himself again if he was reading things right. It had been such a long time since he'd played this game. "Listen, Min, with me it's always going to mean something. Especially with you,... I mean someone like you. And,... considering it's been so long - I mean generally."

She let him off with a smile. Sure, a risk taken, but no harm done,....

And nicely mended.

She tidied her hair. "Never mind, eh? Fancy a cuppa?"

Dark came early and Finn slipped away, forced the creaking gate, its rusty protestations lost in a shrieking wind and the crash of the sea.

"Night then," he said.

She stood behind him, face cowled by her hoodie, pulled the gate shut and for a moment they looked at each other as if through bars, each of them imprisoned in their own worlds, unable to reach the other "Night Finn."

"Call me if you need anything," he said.

She gave him a confident little nod, and a paper thin smile. "You too."

He groped his way along the sea wall until he found the steps up by the harbour. The sea was crashing somewhere close but too dark to tell how far out. The scent of it overwhelmed him, and the sand felt soft underfoot. Sneaking thief, he thought. Thief in the night. Stealing away. His heart ached. It ached for something he had forgotten existed. It was partly imagination, imagination he might have spent the night with Hermione, lain in her arms, in the warm nurturing heat of her.

Had he read that right? Is that really what she'd meant? He hoped he'd not hurt her feelings with his clumsiness.

As he stepped up, a little breathless, onto the promenade there came a call from up the street - still a huddle of smokers and drinkers around the door of the King James. He couldn't make out what was said, or if it was to attract his attention or not. He didn't turn, kept his head down and disappeared into the alley by Squinty's garage, melted into the shadows.

The house was only a short walk away now, and surely he'd be okay except he could see ahead a couple of strange cars, people inside. Maybe they were hanging around, still after a sound-bite for the tea time news. Someone must have fingered him as a witness. It had not occurred to him his own place might be similarly besieged.

It wasn't as if they cared about the poor drowned girl. The only tears for her would be his and Hermione's, and the girls' friends and family of course, if she was ever identified. His car was parked around the corner on the only bit of spare land. He could reach it without being seen. He climbed in, moved off quietly, down to the promenade. What now? Back to the Sea View? Too dangerous. Take shelter with Lionel? Feasible, but Finn didn't want to talk about the girl with anyone else but Hermione. He couldn't go to Helena either, for the same reason, plus plenty of others.

He thought to drive around for a bit, maybe have a meal at that hotel again, and he did drive out with the intention of doing so, but was surprised, an hour later, to find himself on the motorway, doing ninety, heading back to his old life, in Aylesbury.

Chapter Twenty Six

Morning and Carrickbar is quiet again, a pale sun slanting out to sea, a cold wind blowing in, nothing left of the half hearted media scrum except for chip papers and a cluster of pint glasses on the doorstep of the King James. The light in the Sea View Cafe is golden, transcendent. Hermione is thinking of the drowned girl. Meanwhile she busies herself with a cloth and Mr Muscle.

The Cafe shines.

First in: Squinty for his pies.

"So what was all that about then?"

She's ready for this. She has lain awake all night and had plenty of time to think on what she'll say, which is as little as possible. Anything meaningful she can share with no one but Finn. It is a sacred trust between them, whether they like it or not, whether he, Finn, likes it or not. The girl had come to them. They had found her. They alone will remember her. The police had merely tidied her away.

Did she really make a pass at him?

What was she thinking?

"What's that then, John?"

"Oh, come on lass - the whole town's buzzing with it."

"Better ask them then, eh? Pies is it?"

"Papers say she was naked?"

"Do they now?" She might have known. Turn a tragedy like that into titillation. That juicy little snippet must have come from one of the coppers.

Bastards.

"So?" Squinty is ravenous for news - rather wishes he'd found the girl himself. Hermione senses this, is revolted by him as per custom. He must have some redeeming features, but as usual she struggles to find any. She tries to imagine him clean and shaved, and suited, hair

clipped and brushed. Fails.

"So what?..." she asks.

"Well, was she?"

"Listen, John. How old are you, darlin' ? You know by now not to believe anything you read in the paper's right? It's all made up. Everything. It's made up so much you wonder why they make such a fuss of asking anybody questions, ‘cos they just write what they want in the end. Well, 'don't they?" She's hoping this will put him off the scent.

It doesn't.

"That's why I'm asking you. You found her? You and that Finnucky guy?"

"Me and Finnucky? Well, maybe we did, but that's all there is to it. Was a stranger John, young girl. Never seen her before. End of."

He looks thoughtful for a moment. "Maybe one of them pickers out on the beds?"

She's momentarily stung by this flash of perception. "Don't know."

"Serves em right. Fucking foreigners. Them's our cockle beds. They've no right comin' over 'ere and strippin' 'em out."

She feels herself flushing hot at his ignorance. "Wouldn't be here if they weren't desperate, John. Now, is there anything else you're wanting?" She's hoping there isn't.

What's on her mind mostly right now is Finn, and what might be on his mind, and what he might be thinking about her. It had been a subtle invitation, last night, but not so subtle it went over his head, surely? She'd seen the pause in him, felt the opening of his eyes in response to hers, and she was feeling a bit cheap on account of that. But it was Helena's fault, or rather Finn's for admitting to taking Helena out to dinner. And so what if it was only dinner, and then because it was her birthday and Finn was just being a nice guy, and Helena all beautiful and vulnerable and haughty at the same time? But it's never just dinner with a woman like Helena - at least not for long. So Hermione had made her move, rushed it maybe, and blown it.

And now Finn isn't answering his phone.

Shit.

The door jingles and, as she's thinking of the devil, in walks Helena all neat in a pair of blue spray-ons and a snug pink top. She perches on a barstool at the counter, careful to leave a stool between her and Squinty. Squinty glances sideways, slides off his stool and heads for the door.

"What about your pies John?"

"Keep 'em warm," he says. "I'll be back later."

Helena wears the trace of a smirk, looks otherwise flushed and breathless, her brow shiny with a glossy film.

Hermione watches Squinty beetling away, back to his hole. "How'd you do that?" she asks.

Helena is puzzled. "Do what?"

"That man's like a slug. Keeps slithering back 'ere. Ughh! Runs scared from you though."

Helena laughs. "Clearly you are more attractive to him?"

Is that an insult? Hermione is ready to go all defensive, then remembers she and Helena are friends now. "Shouldn't think so. All women are about the same to Squinty. Pair of tits to grope and somewhere to shove his dick."

"Except it's clear to me this man has no dick."

"Oh, he's a dick all right."

"You have seen it?"

"Ughh, thank God no. The thought of what might be lurkin' in 'is trousers makes me wanna puke."

Helena thinks for a while. "I've been shagged by worse, but I take your point. This man, Squinty, perhaps it's his balls that are missing. He is

afraid of me. This is the only other logical conclusion. You are too polite with him. Just tell him to fuck off. But you must also mean it, or at least pretend to. Nine tenths of intimidation is in the eyes."

"I would but,... I worry he might like that."

Helena laughs again, pauses while the air clears for a change of subject, then asks: "Enough, this talk of men. Listen, you are all right this morning, darling?"

Hermione nods, taken aback to be referred to as Helena's darling. Are they such good friends already? She supposes they must be. "I'm,... fine. You? You look a bit,... tired."

"Headache. You have water?"

"Bottle or tap?"

"Tap is free?"

"Of course. Want Asprin or somethin'?"

Helena shakes her head, smiles a reassurance that Hermione reads as unconvincing.

Then Helena asks: "Finn?"

Hermione darkens, is non committal: "Finn?"

Patient look now. Helena speaks slowly. "Finn is also all right?"

Hermione, slightly evasive: "Dunno,... not answering 'is 'phone. Maybe I'll call on 'im later. Thought we weren't talkin' 'bout men."

"Finn is different. Finn interests me, but not in the usual way, you understand?"

No. Hermione does not understand. "Oh? Maybe you should call on him then."

"Already done that. No answer. Tried his phone also. And his car is gone. Kyle tells me there were reporters in the village until late last night."

Flutter of panic now in Hermione's breast: "Car's gone you say?"

"Listen, I'm not here to tittle tattle." She sighs. "I've seen many dead, Hermione. Bodies shot to pieces, blown up, bits missing, you know? Soon you are not seeing the human being, not feeling the shock so much. But for you and Finn, this is not so common a thing? I mean, a body on the beach. In England."

Hermione nods, decides to trust in this new friendship, if that's what it is. "It was strange, Helena. Upsetting, yes. But we were okay, I think. Think maybe it's something else with Finn,... that is,.. I'm afraid it might be something else - the reason he's not answering his phone."

"Oh?"

"Think something might have happened,... up in the flat."

Helena raises an eyebrow. "You *think* something might have happened?"

The door jingles. In walks a stranger - young guy, twenties, carefully coiffured. He orders a latte, then sits. Both Hermione and Helena sense a peculiar vibe. Helena looks cross at his interruption. She has a sixth sense for journalists and other spies. "So,.." she says, a secret sideways glance at the stranger. "It is pleasant weather for the time of year, yes?"

Hermione's not sure where this is going. "Em,.. yes,.. lovely today. Cold wind though, don't you think?"

"Yes. A cold wind." Helena makes a move, as if to slide from her stool, but Hermione makes a grab for her hand, relaxes it to just a touch.

Don't go, Helena.

Helena adjusts her posture, nods, warms to the gesture. "Reporters," she says, a little overloud. "They are like those fish that feed at the bottom of the sea."

"Oh? What's that then?"

"They feast on everyone else's shit."

Hermione pulls a face. "Ew,.."

"But this is true. They were here until late last night. Surprises me if the more intelligent one's do not come sneaking back this morning. Catch us off guard." She gives the guy a pointed stare.

Hermione concurs. "Surprise me too."

The guy says nothing, drinks his coffee, looks out of the window. He turns at some point and looks up to find both women looking directly at him. He tries an innocent smile but Helena is not impressed.

"Listen, sonny, you are cute. There is no denying this. But there is a funny smell about you. So drink up and fuck off."

The guy leaves. Hermione suppresses a titter. "What if he wasn't a reporter?"

"Listen, I think we are justified in our suspicions." She takes out her phone. "I try Finn again."

Hermione feels another flutter of panic.

Still no answer.

The panic changes to an anxiety fed by the peculiar instinct that something has gone wrong, that Finn has met with trouble.

"So," says Helena. "This thing that might have happened. It translates loosely as follows: You are both upset, you find comfort in conversation with each other. And why not? So then you invite him to stay over?"

Hermione nods.

"And he declined?"

Another nod, sheepish this time. "But nicely."

Helena sighs. "Yes, this is Finn. Nice. But a little dim in the ways of love. You must not read too much into it. Everything with this man is both dim and complicated. However, unlike Squinty this man has balls, somewhere, but is momentarily so oppressed by life he has forgotten where they are."

"But I shouldn't have, Helena."

"Shouldn't have what?"

"Invited him to stay."

"Why not? You like him. He is clean. You are horny. I see no problem with this."

Hermione blushes. Horny? Yes, that was always her trouble. "No, I mean because,... because he's married. Isn't he?"
Helena shakes her head. "Listen, I know nothing on this subject other than what I read in him between the lines. Finn is no more married than I am."

"But you are married Helena, aren't you?"

"Pftt,.. this merely a formality. We do not break it, my husband and I, because we cannot be bothered speaking to one another. Husband decides to marry current tart-bitch mistress, he makes effort soon enough. And I will oblige him if we can agree suitable finances."

"But what if it's not like that with Finn?"

"Listen, Finn is doormat. This happens to nice guys. It takes a lot to upset them, and they are taken advantage of by others. His children are wasters, and his wife is globe trotting tart-bitch corporate mistress who is probably shagging her boss, though Finn is too nice to even think this of her."

Hermione laughs. It's hard to know how to read Helena at times. "He told you all that?"

"No. Listen, he tells me nothing. This is simply the story I make up for him in the mean time until we find out what really makes him ticking. But also, I assure you, when it comes to men, I am never wrong."

Hermione remembers a time when the Sea View Cafe was everything, that the transformation of this place from a tired old greasy spoon had helped to heal the split with Brian, and the shock of her father's suicide. She had not thought of a man, not seriously, not since picking up a paint brush, and it annoyed her now that as soon as the place was finished and sparkling, she should be thinking of men again - or at least of one man in particular, and maybe it was only Finn because it

was safe to think of him - safe because he was unattainable. Or was she one of those women who, in spite of herself, singled out the men who were most likely to ruin her?

"What is it with men, Helena? I'm in control here. Built this place from nothin', owe none of it to any man. So why do I want a man in my bed?"

Helena raises an eyebrow. "Well,... obviously for fucking. And better a man in your bed when needed, than in your life."

"But you can't separate the two things. He's in your bed, he's in your life. He's in your life, he's a pain in the arse."

"Mostly I agree with this analysis. Even Finn, I suspect."

"Oh?... How do you mean? What's wrong with Finn?"

Helena reads the defensive tone, smiles inwardly at it. "No passion. Arguing with this man would be like swatting smoke. And he seems to spend all his spare time mending old watches. I'm sure he fucks well. I'm sure he is a gentle, considerate lover, but think I would find him very annoying to live with."

"Is that so bad? I mean,... for all of that I can't imagine him ever hurting someone - not deliberate. You know? And mending watches,... well, it's kind of sweet, don't you think? Least you know where he is - not down the pub selling drugs, or shaggin' 'round all the time. He's like a big kid really. And,... you know,... well,... lovable."

Helena pauses a moment to take this in before moving on. "All of this is true. Listen, you are clearly taken with him. We shall work on it together. We shall make him fall in love with you. Trust me, it will be easy."

"Oh,... don't Helena. He's as like to fall for you if you try anything on. Everyone I ever fancied ended up going off with my better looking girlfriends."

Helena resists the flattery, but believes it to be sincere. "Ah, but rest assured I don't want Finn in that way. This would be a waste of time for me, and him. For us it is friends only. Truly. It's decided. It's you who shall have him. Though I might like to borrow him from time to time if this is acceptable to you. For practical matters only,... you

understand?"

"Practical matters?"

"For odd jobs,... Finn is very handy man. You think for sex? For sure not for sex. Sex with me would kill this man."

Is Hermione to be insulted again? Why would sex with Hermione not also kill him? Is she too lukewarm? Too gentle? Too inexperienced? "Except he's married, Helena. And we're both talkin' bollocks."

"I tell you: this man is not married."

"And he's also missing."

"Yes. This last problem does worry me." Helena looks around and as if just realising something, decides it's a good time to change the subject: "You are not decorating for Christmas?"

"Christmas? Ruin this minimalist décor with all that cheap festive tat? No way! Never bother much with Christmas."

Helena nods sagely. "If you will forgive a statement of well-intentioned racism, you English have lost your souls. This is my opinion, you understand? Let me rescue you. You will come to my house for Christmas dinner."

"Em,..."

"Is easy. Say yes, unless you have other arrangements? I will also invite Finn."

"Isn't that a bit,...well,... obvious?"

"Not to Finn. Remember, he is a bit slow in this regard. And his stomach is his weakness. But you are right. We shall also invite Lionel as a cover."

"You know Lionel?"

"I make it my business to know everyone who knows my son. Lionel is kind. He is a great English gentleman. This is a good idea, I think. Kyle will be pleased. He talks about you all endlessly."

"I don't think it's a good idea at all, Helena."

"You say that, even though you are already wondering what to wear?"

Hermione smiles. Yes, that's exactly what she's wondering.

Chapter Twenty Seven

So,.. midnight and Finn had failed. And his weariness had magnified it to a proportion and to a weight that finally crushed him. It was not that he'd expected to succeed, but the suddenness of this capitulation left his head spinning. He remembered the afternoon with Hermione very clearly, their every word seemingly presided over by the spirit of a dead girl, and the next thing he was pulling into the close, about to renew his acquaintance with married life, with his wife who had grown distant to him, and with his boys who were men, and who laughed at him.

He felt empty.

Got to break it first, Finn.

Hermione had said that, and she was right. But he had not actually come home to break it. In fact, he didn't know why he had come home. It was something to do with the girl, the dead girl on the beach. Shock, perhaps? Sadness? Wondering who she was, wondering if anyone would ever find out, come to claim her, or if she would be for ever anonymous, a life cut short and wasted, and no one ever to know of it.

He was thinking too of Hermione, of that hard won confession of the trials of her life. He had not deserved such a confidence, and the sharing of it had only tightened the bond between them - a bond he had no right to be encouraging. Yet there it was, and when he thought of Hermione now, his heart ached, and the more it ached the further away from her he had to get.

So, Aylesbury again. It was midnight, midweek, and there was something strange about the house because there were no lights on. He'd at least expected the lads to still be up, the conifers casting long shadows across the back from the lights in their rooms, their habitual long vigils hunched over Playstations. But there was nothing. And in the blackness it was as if the house had forgotten him.

He wondered what Kathleen would say, if she'd be angry or cold by now, wondered if Kathleen was even at home. He hoped she wasn't - at least then he might have until the weekend to work out what he was going to say to her. He'd thought nothing about her on the journey home, thought only about Carrickbar, and the dead girl, and Hermione, and everything he was leaving behind.

His emptiness gave way briefly to a nervousness, a skittering panic that he did not know what Kathleen would say or do. Then he was feeling empty again. And cowardly.

The last thing he'd expected was that a woman might want him. In bed. Hermione had told him it needn't mean anything, but the truth was it had hurt that she'd said it, because he'd wanted it to mean something. But he couldn't have that, because the Finn Finucane who had ruined his life once was the same Finn Finucane, as yet unexplained to himself, unreconstructed, and he could so easily ruin it again, ruin also anyone he came near.

And Hermione had a story, one he hoped Lionel would tell. It was a story of putting herself back together after tragedy and adversity, and succeeding at it. She was ready to move on. She was ready to make a fresh start with another love. With someone ballsy and sure of themselves, and that wasn't Finn. But it couldn't be him anyway, and why? Because he was still in freefall, on the way down.

So,... he was here now, and there was music to face. There would be Kathleen's scold, the boys' sneer.

Better get on with it then.

He pulled onto the drive. It was a cold, wet night, so he felt for the remote in the glove box. The garage door rumbled to life, cantilevered up slowly, a slice of anaemic light leaking out across the drive. But there was already a car in the garage. Finn stared at it, puzzled. Had he got the right house? It was a BMW, a big, black, corporate sort of thing.

Kathleen's?

Had she changed her car already? But she'd not had the Merc that long, surely? He remembered then the old argument about why they'd needed a double garage, felt momentarily sick at the thought of stepping back into that life of conspicuous consumption.

Break it!

He had come to break it.

No, he had come running from Hermione.

Who wanted him.

Running back to a woman who did not.

Because it was safer not to be wanted by anyone.

Oh?

Interesting revelation, Finn!

Is it that you fear to be loved properly?

He took a breath, his head spinning. He needed to sleep. God, he hoped Kathleen was not in. He could field the boys' contempt by simply shouting at them. But after that he needed to sleep.

The house had an unfamiliar scent layered over the usual greeting of sweaty training shoes in the hall. There was Kathleen's scent, but something else too and he couldn't work it out. He paused by the hall table, an habitual reflex while he riffled through the mail, sorted it into two piles - one for junk, one for bills. He caught only briefly the reflection of something moving in the mirror. He felt a shiver?

Something?

It was a man, fifties, silver haired, and naked. Finn paused long enough to check this last fact as it came swimming sluggishly against the tide of his fatigue.

Okay, check.

The guy was definitely naked.

Not young, but muscled.

It was Finn's undoing. Had he not paused, he might have avoided the baseball bat that caught him square on the side of the head. The next thing he was lying in a pool of sticky wet on the parquet floor, something oozing out of him.

There followed two days in blackness before he woke to stitches and a swollen eye. The first hand to touch his belonged to a tender Irish nurse called Siobhan whom he vaguely recognised. She spoke to him softly, but he couldn't understand what she said because his brain

wasn't working in the language department.

Then came a uniformed copper with a notebook, to whom Finn could respond no other way than by wearily shaking his head. But to shake his head felt like there were knives sticking out of it. He wanted to say there had been a man in his house, but the words wouldn't come, and finally the copper was elbowed aside by the one face in all of this he needed most to see. Only when he saw her did Finn close his eyes and relax back into a place of healing. If there were answers to this puzzle, then she would have them.

For now he was safe.

"Carina?"

"Okay," she said. "We'll take it as a plus you recognise me. Welcome home, Finn. Nasty crack on the head, and concussion, but no permanent damage. Now rest. I'll see if I can find your doctor, find out what's going on."

It was the ambulance crew who'd recognised him, the coppers who'd called for the ambulance, after they'd received a call from Finn's address about an intruder. And word had circulated, as words do, until eventually Carina's telephone had chirruped.

Finn was still part of a family.

And more well thought of than he'd realised.

Morning now, and Finn was dipping in and out of consciousness. But consciousness hurt, so Finn sought the dreams and hung onto them for dear life until the light drew him out, and held him fast in a world where the light scalded his eyes and his head was on fire. Carina was sitting in the corner flipping through case notes - the bulk of her day ahead in the clinical psychology unit. She looked up as Finn focused on her.

"Morning sleepy-head. Okay, listen up. Best I feed you this in small pieces. Nod if you understand what I'm saying."

Finn nodded, but cautiously.

"Good. You have concussion, remember? You have swelling, and stitches from a cut on your head. It'll leave a scar, but shouldn't be too

noticeable once your hair grows back. Not spoiling much anyway, you ugly old bastard."
"Hair?"

"They had to shave a lot of it off to get at the wound."

"Wound?"

"Baseball bat, according to the policeman."

"Baseball bat? Guy. Naked guy. Who?"

"Oh? He was naked? Really? Can't imagine him naked. At least I'd rather not. Name's Richard. Kathleen's away. Richard's her lover. Also her boss, which is unwise of her, and unprofessional, unprofessional also of me to judge, and perhaps also to be breaking the news to you so suddenly. It happens though. And best to get it out of the way. He was sleeping over. Your house is conveniently located for him, and it was empty."

Kathleen?

Kathleen was having an affair?

"Lover?"

"'Fraid so." She sighed. "I'm such a dope. I didn't see that one coming."

Finn reacted to this with a sudden abdominal heaving which Carina correctly diagnosed as a precursor to copious vomiting. She made it with the bowl just in time, held his head while he vented himself, expertly managing to avoid getting any on her suit.

She examined his vomit with a professional air, was satisfied it contained nothing it should not. "Okay, enough for now," she said. "But listen, you must aim to get up today, no matter how much it hurts. Show the good people here you can use the toilet."

"Toilet?"

"Then they'll discharge you. You're thinking you have nowhere to go, and this is possibly true. So, it looks like I'm taking you home with me for a while."

"I can't,... I can't move anywhere. My head feels loose,... and on fire."

"Oh? I'd not taken you for a cry baby. Listen, hospital is no place to get better. You know this as well as I do. We patch up the holes as best we can, while trying not to kill you in the process. That's all. You get well at home. Also you're hogging a bed, and Christmas is coming. We kick out all the walking wounded at Christmas. Remember? Accountancy rules, not clinicians. You know this too."

Finn rallied, angry: "Not my rules. Not any more."

"Ah, I see you're feeling better already. Good man. Remember - move your bowels, and I'll come take you home for a bit. See you on your feet. Should be interesting. Haven't lived with a man for a long time."

"Wait. Kathleen,... How do you know? Her and this,... Richard?"

"Went round this morning and asked. Charming type. Charismatic, ambitious. But not my type. I digress."

"Boys?"

"You mean those ne-er-do-wells who were freeloading off you? According to Richard they now have paid internships, one in banking, one retail. I forget which is which. One is in Frankfurt, the other in Paris. Again I forget which. Does it matter? As for Kathleen, I think Richard said she was in Shanghai - or it might have been Singapore. That doesn't matter either. Bottom line is she's away and apparently not thinking very much about you."

Finn lay a while in silence, unable to take any of this in. He'd only been gone what? A few months, and the boys had suddenly realised their start in life, and Kathleen had taken up with a new man?

All that heartache, that stress, and all he'd had to do was leave home and everything came out all right for everyone else.

Including Kathleen.

All along, it had been him.

He was the problem.

He called Carina back. "Kathleen,... and Richard? How long?"

"Didn't ask. That's between you and her, but if you were cynical you might wonder at her meteoric rise in the company. Advertising did you say?" Carina looked thoughtful for a moment. "Interesting concept, advertising. Ever tried to analyse it? Our willingness to believe more in the story someone is telling, than in the evidence of our own eyes."

"What?"

"Sorry, I'm confusing you. Rest now, but make sure you get up, *and move your bowels*."

"So romantic."

"Hmm. I would kiss you but you're full of vomit. And you smell really bad. I'll be back at lunchtime to check on you. Chin up Finn, things can only get better after this."

"I'll take your word on that. But you have enough to worry about, Carina,... I mean without worrying about me,...."

"I don't worry about anything, Finn. And none of my patients are even half as interesting as you. You make such a promising basket-case. But I refuse to hand you over to the nut house. Yours is one story I'm writing up that I want to end well."

"Then I'll do my best not to disappoint you."

Chapter Twenty Eight

Hermione did not want to spend Christmas with Helena. She wanted to spend it alone, in the flat, staring out at the grey sea. She did not want to wear the dress, did not want to dress at all, but sit all day in pyjamas, wrapped in a duvet, like last Christmas. And besides, Finn would not be there. It was not clear when exactly he had got under her skin, but he was there now and she was hating him for it. She had revealed more about herself to him than to anyone else during that all too brief an interlude in her flat. And now he'd gone. She'd trusted him, and people you'd trusted should at least have the decency to stick around, so you could trust them some more.

He was still not answering his 'phone and she was reluctant to ring again in case she was beginning to sound needy. It reminded her of all the other times she'd run around desperate to please a man in case he left her.

Well, fuck him.

This was not the reason of course why she felt so flat - or so she told herself. It was not the reason she did not want to go to Helena's party. She was simply feeling down, feeling old and cold. It was about her. No one else.

Fuck him.

Fuck all of them.

Fucking men!

Except Lionel. Oh, and Kyle,...

Lionel would be there, charming and funny. And Kyle was always a love, and Helena too had begun to reveal an alluring warmth, a warmth that hooked her in the gut and made her feel at times weepy for no good reason. And anyway it was Hemione's fault Finn would not be there, her fault Finn had left Carrickbar, her fault Finn was not answering his 'phone.

And why was that?

Because you invited him into your bed, as well as your trust.

And he's married!
And thus, slowly did she circle.

She looks now to the red dress spread across the chair back. She has not worn it for a long time, hoped it would not fit, but it does, like a glove. In ten years, her figure has not changed, not filled out. It might have been different had there been more children. Sure, there was always that - she had at least kept her figure, so the likes of Squinty could perve at her.

Anyway,...

Better get going then.

The cracker cracks, gives a little spark and a miniature pack of cards falls on the table. Kyle, in paper hat and posh shirt, has amassed a pile of junk from the cracker hoard, also a new 'phone which he has slid precariously into his top pocket. Helena looks like a goddess in a black dress and with gold jewels and her hair fluffed out like an eighties pop diva. Lionel is a tweed gentleman, charming, buoyant, fragrant in Old Spice. And Hermione is smiling, but it's been hours and her smile feels tight, and is making her teeth ache. Helena reads this correctly and passes her a conspiratorial wink.

In the kitchen, amid the carnage of turkey and trimmings, Hermione wraps an apron around the red dress and prepares to do battle. Helena, is carrying plates through, laughing at a joke of Lionel's. She looks flushed. Happy. Beautiful.

"It was a lovely meal, Helena. You worked so hard. The food, the trimmings, the table. Everything. Perfect."

"Ah, you know exactly what to say, Hermione. Fortunately I believe you. Thank you. It is not an effort I usually make, but this time I wanted it more than anything. Thank you for coming. I know you didn't want to."

"It's not that. Really. I'm just a bit worried,... about Finn. Have you tried ringing him again?"

"Often. He is not answering. Like his 'phone is flat or something."

"What if?...."

Helena catches the anxious question mark, the unspoken fear, volleys it right back with a frank assertiveness. "You think maybe he is lying dead in a ditch somewhere?"

Hermione winces. "I don't know."

"I think we would have heard."

"Why would we?"

"We just would. Now, are we to clear this mess up or not? I don't want to miss the Queen."

"The Queen?"

"She's on the telly at three."

"You watch the *Queen?"*

"Why not? I am British citizen. Like you."

"Em,... no. Not like me you're not. And I don't mean that in a bad way."

"Pfft. I tell you before. You English. You are losing your souls."

"We all lost our souls, Helena, back in 2008, along with everything else, when all our sunny futures were sold out and given to the banks. Keep the bastards in cigars and caviar."

Hermione regrets the joke. She's been reading up on Georgia and the troubles after the break-up of the Soviet Union, the push for separation, the sudden uprising, the killing,... so much killing. On the scale of human suffering a mere financial crash is irrelevant by comparison.

Or a precursor to worse.

She reckons Helena was old enough to have been caught up in that, in the first wave, back in '91 or '92. She wonders about the scale of her losses. "I'll load the dishwasher," she says. "You'll be hand-washing those fancy glasses, I suppose. You'd better do that. I'm sure to drop one."

Helena picks up a crystal wine-glass. Pings it with her fingernail so it

rings like a meditation bell. Then she tosses it into the air so it spins to a blur of light. Hermione gasps, braces herself for the crash. Helena catches the glass between her fingers, deft as a juggler, holds it safe, smiles. Hermione breathes, then Helena deliberately lets it drop and watches calmly as it shatters on the tiles.

Helena shrugs. "Is nothing, Hermione. And life is too short to be worrying. So live it. Or let it go."

"Okay, Confucius. But remind me never to let you wash up in my kitchen."

Evening now and Hermione has observed the peculiar sight of Helena motionless and attentive throughout the Queen's speech. Lionel, a man she had for sure taken as a Royalist, fidgeted, but maintained a dutiful silence. She doubted he could answer questions on the Queen’s main points. Kyle made excuses and retired to his room for the duration. And now the light is going, evening coming on, and she is thinking of home, thinking of Finn.

Kyle has received from his father, via Amazon, the gift of a racing game for his Playstation. He and Lionel negotiate the take-over of the big TV in the lounge to play it. Helena motions for Hermione to join her in the conservatory which she has warmed to a tropical heat with the combined forces of radiators and roaring convectors. Helena sips on fine malt whiskey from a crystal tumbler. Hermione makes do with tonic water because there's something wild and dangerous about Helena that demands she remain at least functionally sober in her presence.

There's a silence between them, as if everything they can think of to say has been said, that their fledgling friendship has run aground in the shallows. Hermione is thinking friends share things that are not shared with family, sometimes especially *not* with family, and could she risk such a sharing with Helena, like the things she has shared with Finn? Helena relaxes, leans back in her chair, eyes sleepy and semi closing.

Hermione notices the dark-half moons, the puffy lids. "You look tired," she says. "You okay?"

"Christmas is hard work. You have right idea, ignoring it."

"We'll go. Me and Lionel. Let you and Kyle spend some time together."

Helena's eyes flicker fully open. "No,... they have just settled, let them

have their fun."

There's something of an alarm in her voice, though Hermione cannot think she is so desperate for company, not a woman as tough as this. "A bit longer then."

Helena relaxes, sleepy again: "He makes a good grandfather. You think?"

"Who? Lionel?"

"And Finn a good father, also?"

"Em,... I'm sure Finn was a good dad."

"Make a good father for Kyle, you think?"

"Sure,... I suppose. But Kyle already has a father."

"But he's not here. Kyle's father will never be here, Hermione. And one day he will marry tart bitch mistress. For sure he will."

"Finn's not here either."

"But he would be if he could, I'm sure. Unlike Kyle's father. And Kyle needs a father. He's eighteen, but no matter how old he is, he will always be about twelve."

Woa, play that back one more time.

Finn will make a good father for Kyle?

Bitch!

One minute she is almost loving Helena, truly, seriously loving her, which is strange and interesting and lovely, and the next she's fearing her for the inevitable love rival such a woman will always be, a woman who can have any man she wants: confident, sexual, powerful, calculating. And Helena wants Finn,.. or she is talking herself into wanting him, or why else talk this way?

Sure, she's seen Finn and Kyle together, seen how they connect. Well, let Helena have him then, the stupid man. She'll eat him alive, ruin his life. If he thinks he's got problems now, let him look back after a few

years of being with her.

He'll wish he was dead!

"Helena, if that's what you're thinking,..."

"Thinking?"

"To make a father out of him, for Kyle,... Finn I mean,... or a,... a stepfather or something,... I,... I know where he lives. I have his address. It's a long way, but you could go, find out if he's okay."

Always were one for cutting your nose off to spite your face, weren't you Hermione?....

Oh, shut up. Who asked you?

Helena is puzzled: "Oh? I go to Finn, and then what?"

"Well, I don't know,... seduce him or something,... I'm sure he'd be easy - I mean for you."

Helena's brow furrows ever deeper in puzzlement. "You have his address? You kept quiet about that. As for easy, I thank you. But I have already tested and find him resistant on this matter - not that I was serious, but listen, I tell you before: I don't want him. Not as a husband, or a lover or anything. This would be unprincipled. Barbaric. But as a father to Kyle he is perfect. I have decided."

Hermione is caught now in the spin of Helena's changing thoughts. And Helena's thoughts are a broken merry-go-round, whirling faster and faster,... or maybe she just doesn't get her. She laughs. "I'm not sure Finn would agree - I mean about fatherhood. It sounds like he's had a bellyful with his own children. Failure to launch either of them."

"There are qualities in Finn that will suit a patient and thoughtful woman, like you, Hermione. I marry Finn, we divorce in six months. Tops. So,... I skip the middle part. He is already my ex-husband, father to Kyle. But local."

Hermione laughs, a little too loud. "Your thinkin' makes a crazy kind of sense way you say it. But later on, when I play it back, it'll sound like the daftest thing I ever heard."

"And you Hermione? You will be Kyle's mother?"

Hermione freezes, her glass half way to her lips. Is Helena drunk? The conversation is really strange now; she's not sure how much of it is real, how much of it metaphorical. "That makes no sense straight off, Helena. Kyle already has a mother."

"But if,..."

"If what?"

"If anything happened to me. You would look after Kyle?"

"Helena,... are you telling me you're ill?"

"Not ill. I am fine, most of the time. But sometimes, I feel like,... stock market,..."

"Eh?"

"Always crashing, never quite hitting the floor."

Hermione feels a stillness between them and a numbness coming over her. "But,... if anything happened to you,... surely his father?"

"The city is no place for Kyle, and his father does not want to own him. Kyle will never go to Cambridge University, or become boss man of smash and grab city firm. Kyle will always work with his hands. And the city will eat him. Make minimum wage slave of him. It makes him ill to go there, even for a weekend - the noise, the pace."

"Well, I feel that way about cities myself. But he'll,... meet someone. Someone will love him. He's very lovable, Helena. And then he won't need any one else to take care of him 'cos he'll have a wife."

"Wife? You tell me this before but I don't think so. Not for Kyle."

"Well, why not? I mean, Kyle's maybe not that bright, and I know he worries about stuff, but he's not,... well,.... *abnormal*, is he? He has spirit, and energy, and he can work. And,.. and he's a good looking, lovable lad. Course he'll meet someone. Some sweetheart of a girl will find him irresistible."

Helena is uncomfortable with the idea. "Hmm,... it will take someone

special. And not many of them in Carrickbar. Only fat slapper-tarts in short dresses and bare midriffs - even in mid-winter. Ughh! I would hate that. Fat slapper-tart and Kyle. The thought disgusts me."

"That's cos you're his mum. No girl will ever measure up. Even if she's perfect. Nothing queer in that. Look, drink up. Change the subject, you're freaking me out."

Helena smiles, nods, drains her glass with a gulp. Offers whiskey to Hermione's empty glass, and Hermione accepts at last the fire. Something is wrong here - Helena's strangeness is issuing from a deep fracture, too deep to make sense of, and too wide to be mended.

Finn for a father, and Hermione for a mother?

But where does that leave Helena if it isn't actually,...

Dead.

Chapter Twenty Nine

Finn discovered Carina's house to be both restful and disturbing. It was restful on account of the location, a detached cottage, tucked a mile down a narrow country lane, then a half mile down a rutted track. And it was disturbing on account of the art on the walls - the lounge, the stairs, the bedrooms, even the bathroom - which portrayed mainly naked people, enjoying sex with gay abandon.

Of course, some people saw only the sex, explained Carina. But they were also people as they really are - unclothed, innocent. It was only as we cover ourselves, she explained, the problems begin - and sometimes we wore so many layers, we could no longer be adequately naked, for even when we thought we were undressed, there were still layers remaining.

"You mean like the Emperor's New Clothes, but in reverse?" asked Finn.

"Yes, exactly so."

But all Finn could see was the sex - sex in all its variety, and it had him wondering if he'd ever enjoyed it like that at all. He wondered too if Kathleen had enjoyed it that way with Richard - if in fact his own reserved sexuality all these years was not so much a defence from a loveless marriage as the root cause of it. Or to put it plainly was it that he'd simply been no good in bed?

Was there anything more guaranteed to make a man feel worthless than that?

There'd been only a few girls before Kathleen, so he was certainly no Lothario, but he was sure he'd enjoyed the erotic, once. Yes, he was certain of it - the surge of a highly charged energy coursing through him at the sight of nothing more than the shape of a woman - dressed or undressed it made no difference. How he'd managed to switch that part of himself off was a mystery, possibly just advancing years - also, he'd thought it rather a blessing.

But now?

Could he ever get that part of himself back? Did he really want to? He thought again of that night when he'd been doorstepped by Helena Aynslea. The sight her in that short dress had certainly lit something up

in him, and she'd noticed it, but the thought of actually,... well,... doing it,.. that was something else.

And with Helena?

Unthinkable.

It would take a lot of energy to fill a woman like her, and he simply no longer possessed it. To even attempt it would kill him.

So what about Hermione?

Gentler, for sure,... constant,... sweet natured.

Damn it, Kathleen. Why didn't you just say you wanted to move on?

The house was quiet, small mullioned windows letting in a soft, soothing light, and there were thick walls to retain the heat. It was a quietly reserved place, sixteenth century, low ceilinged, creaky boards and dark wood. It was a place of refuge, of escape, of both inner and outer healing. There were sandalwood scented joss-sticks and meditation bells, and there were books, a mixture of literature and medical tomes.

There was psychiatry, of course: Jung, Freud, Hillman, and Wilber. Finn skimmed them, but understood no more than one word in ten. She had written her own book too, a study text, retailing at £39.99: Emotional Development of the Western Adolescent.

There was also stuff on philosophy and literature: Austen, Tolstoy, Proust, Dickens. He had not been in her house before, and being there now, he felt ashamed. Her intellect was gargantuan, intimidating. And all those years, it was him, Finn Finucane, bean counter, who had granted her the measure of what she could and could not do.

He also had the sense now that any normal conversation was for her quite pedestrian, her head ticking over lazily, perhaps knowing always what others would say before it was said, or what they would do before it was done, and most of all why.

No wonder she seemed at times so languorous,... even bored.

A man could not possess such a woman by merely seducing her. She would have said that's why she was in her forties, and single. She was

easily the most learned person he knew, but he admired all the doctors at the hospital, their long training, the long hours, the life and death decisions, things that would haunt and crush anyone else.

Bad day at the office darling?

Carina had done all of that, felt her way around the innards of a human being, then did it all again so she could feel her way around the innards of a human mind. She was also very beautiful, sometimes brutally blunt, but always,.. always a comfort. And he felt privileged to know her, privileged that she seemed to want to know him.

Was that it with women, now? Did he want only their companionship, the mother comfort of a soft breast to pillow his head?

The erotic was not about comfort.

It was about danger.

And danger was for fools.

She was out most of the time - leaving for the hospital at seven, returning home after six, then sometimes out again of an evening to the Private Hospital where rich people went to confess their sins, and pay exorbitant fees. She made more in the evenings, even in a few hours, she told him, than she did in a whole day from the public purse.

Meanwhile, she'd arranged for his car to be brought over, even rescued some of his clothes from the house, rescued his phone which was by now flat, plugged it in to charge, while Finn slept.

He was mending quickly, and she liked that, admired in him the determination to at least get back on his feet. As for the insides of his head, he was as lost as anyone else, cracking up but not yet broken, and nothing unusual in that. She had put him in the spare bedroom, considered briefly putting him in her bed, then she might test the degree of his sexual reserve later on, when he was feeling stronger. But she'd decided to be merciful, to enjoy instead his presence, also his embarrassment. Above all Finn was an interesting man, interesting to observe up close.

She had not expected him to run, felt overwhelmed, actually, by his trust in her.

His phone lit up when it had drawn enough juice, and, finding it unlocked she had begun to browse the notifications without a qualm: Helena. Hermione. Helena. Hermione. Helena. Hermione. Kyle. Nothing from Kathleen, but then there wouldn't be, since she supposed this was Finn's secret SIM.

She wondered about Kathleen, wondered how she could so closely resemble the personification of nothingness. Indeed, it was as if Finn had made her up, and the boys too. All were gone now, and a stranger living in his house, a stranger taking over the life Finn himself had for so long needed to escape, and all of them nothing more than a back-story in the fevered narrative of the rest of Finn's life.

Thinking symbolically, Finn's future was clear from the fact his past was closing off, sealing itself up against his return. She wondered if he'd see it that way, wondered if he'd resist it, wondered what it was that had made him come back, drive three hundred miles at dead of night.

She tried Helena first, but the call went straight to answer. Next was Hermione.

Two rings and she was in. Hermione's voice a gush. "Finn?"

"Not Finn. I'm Carina. Were you trying to get hold of Finn?"

Line cut.

Interesting.

She tried again. Lots of rings this time. Finally the answer, a cautious hello.

Be direct, Carina: "Listen, Hermione, Finn's met with a bit of an accident. He's okay, just been out of it for a while."

"Accident? Finn's hurt?"

Carina let out a breath, long and slow. Okay, she had Hermione's attention now. This was the one, she thought: west country accent. Not the Russian. The Russian sounded a bit brassy, and not Finn's type - at least she hoped not, for his sake. Hermione sounded warmer, sweeter, more nurturing. Sure, how could he resist? This was the one Finn had run from. So what now? Protect him? Frighten the bitch off -

interesting thought, Carina - or offer him up for sacrifice? See how he responds? Pick up the pieces later?

Ooh,... interesting!

"He's all right. He's with me. I'm not his wife. I'm,... a friend. A doctor. Not *his* doctor but,... well, ... a friend."

"Doctor?"

"Psychiatrist."

Long pause,... usually was.

"I see."

"Well, I just wanted you to know he's okay. Someone else has called this number - Helena? You know her?"

"Em,... sort of."

"Can you tell her? Finn's not long out of hospital. Bang on the head and stitches. Concussion. He's sleeping now, a bit muddled still, but I'm sure he'll call you back when he's feeling more himself. And Kyle. Kyle also rang."

"Kyle rang too? Oh,... bless him."

"Same message to Kyle if you see him, okay? Finn is all right. He'll be in touch. Soon."

"Thank you. I've been,... I mean,... we've all been,... so worried about him."

"Well. He's on the mend,... bye,.."

"Carina?.... is he,... I mean,... will he be,... coming back?"

Ah,... definitely the one, thought Carina. "Not sure about his plans right now," she said. "But he'll be in touch."

Let her think on that. Not too much information - and she notes Hermione is too reticent to ask for any.

"Okay, thanks."

***

By the second week of the New Year, the stitches were out, but the wound was still a bit weepy so they tried glue. Apart from that Finn had recovered enough to begin making dinner for Carina on the evenings she was home. He did not call Hermione, or Helena, or even Kyle. Carina had given his head an all-over number two shave to balance up the mismatch around the scar, for when it started to grow back. It made him look older, she thought, but tidier. She remarked that in a striped shirt he would have passed for a convict, shackles and all. She imagined him in shackles, always had. But now the shackles were gone, at least the ones she could see. It was something else imprisoning him. And as usual, as with most submissives, his shackles were self invented.

As they sat down to dinner, she was minded to ask him what his plans were. It was clear by now he was settling in with her, and though he was welcome, she did not want him settled - not with her. A man like Finn could easily put off a vital decision for decades, put it off until someone else made it for him.

"So, did you call Hermione, today?"

"Em,... no."

"Helena?"

He shook his head.

"Kyle? You should call Kyle. He sounds lovely."

"Yes, Kyle's a good lad."

"Heard from Kathleen?"

Another shake of the head.

"Still,... it was good news about your boys."

"Can't believe it. Was it me? I mean all those years, Carina?..."

"Not your fault, Finn. You couldn't magic up an internship - not like

what's-his-face."

"No,..." Finn closed off the name - would not speak it. He had not spoken of home, of his marriage, of Kathleen at all. Was it too raw, or was the void too big to fill? He'd been in a nose dive for so long now, every moment expecting to hit the ground, but the impact never came, just an ever deeper chasm opening up as he plummeted downward.

She pressed his hand gently to the table. "Tell me what happened? You seemed settled there in Carrickbar. What brought you back here so suddenly?"

"I suppose,... well,... you see, there was this girl,..."

"Ah!"

"No,.. not like that. She was drowned. Washed up on the beach. Hermione,... Hermione and I found her, stayed with her, until the police came. I can only think it was the shock of that."

"I'm sorry, Finn. Who was she?"

"No idea. Some poor soul,... no,... it was more than that. More than the drowned girl. It was just, being with Hermione, while we waited. And then afterwards we hid in her flat while all the fuss with the media died down,..."

"And?"

"Oh,... nothing. Nothing happened, really. It's just that I realised,... I think I'm in love with her. Or falling,... or something,..."

This was news to both of them. Carina was almost surprised, almost jealous, which gave her pause. She would work on that later, but for now: "That's good, isn't it?"

"I don't know. I don't know if it's real. I want it to be real, but then I'm lonely, Carina. A woman looks at me, any woman, and I'm maybe so desperate I'll rush in and ruin both our lives. I nearly did it with you that time, still might if you'd let me. But I'm no use. I can't even,... "

Finn gestured with his eyes to one of the pictures on the wall, a print of an erotic frieze taken from the Khajuraho temples,... a man and three women - or was it four?...

Carina smiled. "Well, that's maybe a bit ambitious for a first time. You need to start with something simpler,... more straight forward, perhaps."

She was joking, but mention of his loneliness aroused something else in her – unexpected that - but she told herself not to be so sentimental. "Anyway, with me you held back because you thought you were still married. Also because you're a decent man. We ruined nothing. Became friends instead. And friends last much longer than lovers. Or marriages even. Friends endure Finn. Ever wondered about that?"

"No, makes sense. Friends don't have to bring up kids together or live under the same roof and expect the other to make them happy all the time."

He turned to the window as if to look out, but it was winter-dark, and the curtains drawn. He rested his eyes there for a moment. "All that time, and Kathleen,... I thought it was just a middle aged thing, that she'd gone off it, you know? People do, don't they? And I thought what the hell do I do about it? So I tied a knot in it, I let it die, and Carina I mean I really let it die. And I'm not sure I can get it back. All that time and she'd not gone off it at all. She'd just gone off it,... with me."

"Okay, so what? Are you going to let yourself feel worthless? wronged? hurt? angry? Or are you going to get over it? It's already in the past, Finn. And nothing's ruined because you've already opened up a new life for yourself."

He laughed, something cracked and bitter in it. "In Carrickbar? Believe me, Carina, Carrickbar is the definition of ruin. Its day is over, and it's waiting for that one big wave to come in and wipe it from the face of the earth. Everyone there is washed up and broken and waiting to die."

But even as he said it, Finn knew this wasn't true, that it was himself he was talking about, that whatever path he chose from here it was him, washed up and waiting to die.

"Hermione too?"

"No,... not Hermione,... Hermione's doing battle with the inevitable. She runs this old seaside cafe - has it all done up really nice, very modern,... but there's never anyone goes in. She won't last a year."

Carina rather liked the sound of Hermione. "Better than lying down and playing dead."

He relented with a smile. "Sorry, you're right. Anywhere would look the same to me right now. Hopeless, I mean. Hopeless and grey and cold. What would the doctor prescribe? How do I get some passion back in my life?"

"You can't ask me as a doctor. This is my private time, and my doctor's fees are extortionate. Only the top two percent of the population can afford them. And I never advise. I only listen. That's the secret of good psychoanalytical practice."

"Then advise me as a friend."

"Okay. Passion as in sex, or merely lust for life?"

"I think we can forget the sex. Let's start with life."

"Oh,.. pity. Life is so difficult. Sex is easier,... are you into porn?"

"What?"

"Are we friends or what? You can trust me with your answer?"

"Well,... now and then, a man takes pleasure in looking at pictures of naked ladies,... of course."

"Sure, and why not? But listen. My advice, be careful there. Porn deadens the erotic sensibilities sooner or later, and sex becomes mechanical. You become unpromising as a lover. The erotic on the other hand relies very much on the imaginary dimension."

"The erotic? Sex is one thing, getting back in touch with the erotic at my age seems a bit,..."

"Oh? What? Unlikely? Trust me Finn, the only way back to proper sex is through the erotic."

"Well I'm glad because that means we can forget it."

Carina laughed, but gently. "Oh, you're so sweet.

"Actually, what I think I need to do most of all is go home."

"To Carrickbar?"

"No,... home,... and kick that bastard out of my house."

"Good for you. Need any help?"

"I'll be fine."

She was glad he'd said that. There had always been an assertive edge to him, when he knew what he was doing. But real life was a muddle, and so few of us were experts at it – much easier to sit by and allow ourselves to be crushed by it.

Chapter Thirty

Carrickbar, minus five degrees. 06:30 hours. Kyle is dragging bundles of fresh newspapers into the shop and assembling them while Mrs Mackenzie sits motionless with a cup of tea, leafing sniffily through a copy of the Sun. She pauses only to chastise Kyle for working too slowly and then for leaving the door open on such a cold morning. Hermione is jogging past the open door, hears Kyle's good natured apology, grits her teeth and jogs on.

She has read online that ninety percent of the wealth of the country is owned by two percent of the population, that actually most of the population are in hoc to the two percent, that those who own nothing do all the work. She concludes the nation has descended into a condition of slavery - everything rented, leased, borrowed and begged from those who own everything, yet do nothing. She doesn't know how this was allowed to happen, doesn't know what it means for the future - her future, Kyle's future - only that it does not sound good.

And Kyle must be rescued from it, held safe until things improve.

She's making nothing out of the café just now, meagre savings dwindling with each passing week, and she's struggling to maintain the optimism that, come spring, things will improve. Winter in a seaside town has a way of dragging the optimism out of you. But if things do improve, she'll be having words with Kyle about taking him on, then he can be treated right. There'll also be words with Mrs Mackenzie about her treating him wrong.

Finn has not called and it's been weeks now since the message from Carina.

Carina!

Finn is staying with a woman called Carina, who sounded like she knew him very well. Carina is not his wife - she'd been at pains to point that out, like she knew the full story of Finn, or at least a fuller story than the one Hermione possesses. About the only thing she can glean of any use from all of this is the fact he is not staying with his wife.

Greedy.

Oh, all right, she'd been greedy in wanting him that day. And the dead girl had amplified her loneliness, her feelings of existential

worthlessness. That was it with sex, it made you forget for a moment you were bound to die one day. It fooled you into thinking for a little while you were immortal, or even that death didn't matter if you could only squeeze in one last good shag before you went. She supposed money was like that too, that the rich were thinking they could buy their immortality with it - I mean what other reason could there be for wanting so much of it?

Immortality is clearly an expensive business.

Seven thirty and she's back, briny-mud splashed from the salt marsh. Shower, breakfast. Dressed. Black today - all black, from the skin up. Just a bit of silver in the jewelled details. The sign is turned from closed to open. Then she sits. 9:00. 9:30. 10:00. Then it's Squinty for his pies and an eyeful of her tits. Takings by lunchtime: three pounds of Squinty's greasy money - money of mysterious origin.

Sigh.

It had begun as a grey sea sort of day, but by dinner time there's a pale sun painting the town a little more softly, and then a big bike comes thumping up the hill. Stranger. He's a dirty looking guy in leather and studs - and he looks like he's coming in. He's tall, muscled, a little stooped. The helmet comes off and out spills a pile of shaggy grey hair and full whiskers. He has kind eyes though, so she's not expecting trouble. He's looking lost, a bit like Finn on that first day.

The door jingles.

Smile Minnie.

"So,... what can I get you, darlin?'"

He wants a full English and strong coffee - frothy milk and three sugars. Heavy fuel. His tone is polite, respectful. He has nice teeth.

The guy takes Finn's table by the window, peels the leathers open, reveals clean denims underneath. There's a whiff of something nice. A fragrant biker? Different. Not young. Fifties maybe? One of those born again biker guys? She eyes the bike outside. Harley. Newish. She dials it up on her Pad. *Fuck!* You can buy a car for that! The guy's some sort of high roller in a grungy disguise. She decides to add a small salad garnish to the fry-up, and a little biscuit on the side with his coffee.

He calls over: "Haven't been here since I was a kid. Used to be caravans, up on the hill."

Hermione has lived this moment before. "Em,... believe so. Before my time though, darlin'. Travelled far?"

"Hour or so."

"Out for the ride, or heading on somewhere?"

"Just the ride," he says. "Forecast's good."

Hermione smoothes her blouse down. Thinks. If she was ten years younger and him twenty, and a bit less hairy, he might have been her type once. She realises his hands are shaking, slightly swollen with the cold, bless him - there never was a way to keep your hands warm on a bike. She offers him a microwaved wheat bag to warm them - *on the house*, she adds with a smile. He replies that he'll be okay, but thanks her for the offer, wraps his hands instead around his coffee, settles down with the view. She brings his food over.

"Kind of quiet," he says.

"That's Carrickbar," she replies. "Land that time forgot. Out of season anyway. Come summer it's a little busier - but not much. "

The guy nods. "Yea,... it has something though. Good long road in. Broad, curvy. Nice ride on a bike. Can't understand why I ever stopped coming here."

Long road, yes, and a lot of miles before it gets you anywhere. "Well, your mum and dad probably found they could get a package deal to Spain for the same it cost to rent one of those vans, only without the wind and the rain."

He laughs. "Yep. We switched to Spain. Sun was more reliable. Pity though."

They keep up a gentle flow of conversation. Nice guy. Talking to him cheers her. He's gone by one, his bike thundering away up the hill. Takings now are fifteen quid, plus a two pound tip, a charming smile, and a promise to swing by again soon. It's the bacon he's fancying though, not her. At least she hopes so. Not that she'd mind - he was

definitely a nice guy. Apart from the whiskers. *Eugh!*

And she's clearly blown it with Finn.

Bastard.

Kyle finishes his shift at Mackenzies at four. One of Helena's bare mid-riffed tart-bitch fat-slappers comes to relieve him. She watches him leave the shop, a weight around his shoulders, a droop of his lip. He is unaware of her watching. She can imagine how Helena is right about the city life, that it would crush him. But equally there's something about Carrickbar that will hollow him out over time. She's not sure what his potential is, but he needs a more stimulating environment than being bossed about by old crab-face in order to find it. He waves when he sees her, the brightness returning. She waves back, then makes chocolate.

Sure, why would Finn come back to a dump like this?

"Hi Kyle, 'darlin. How's your mum goin' on?"

Kyle sits at the counter, confirms all is well with Helena. Hermione knows she's not imagining the fact there's something in his eyes that seems unable to directly meet hers.

"And you, Kyle. How are things with you? Getting on all right with Mrs Mackenzie?"

Kyle frowns. "She can be a bit,... grumpy."

"So I'm told. But don't let it get to you, love. It's just a start. You'll see. There's lots of other things you can do."

Again the frown. "No real work in Carrickbar, Hermione."

She sighs, forgets Kyle isn't actually a child, that there are depths to him, sparks of insight, just hidden beneath a tangle of neuroses. "Still, got to trust everything will be all right."

Fuck's sake Minnie, don't be so patronising.

Change of subject, quick. "Nice watch you got there."

"Oh,... thanks, Dad bought it. It broke. Finn fixed it for me."

Oh, double-fuck. Let's not start talking about Finn.

Kyle looks hopeful. "Did he tell you when he was coming back?"

"Who, Finn? No, not heard from him, love. You?"

"He called mum. She said to say he was okay."

Hermione catches her breath. "He rang your mum?"

"Other night. Or she rang him. Not sure which. They talked for a bit. Mum didn't say if he was coming back or not. Said he might say something to you about it, when he rang you."

"Em,... well, I'm sure he'll call. He's just busy."

"But he has no job, Hermione. How can he be busy?"

"Oh,... Kyle, darlin'. Finn has a home, a family, a wife down south somewhere. It all sounds a bit messy to me. I'm sure he's just sorting all of that out, and then he'll come back."

"But why would he? There's nothing for me here, even less for a guy like Finn."

"Now don't go talking like that. Carrickbar's just as good as the next place."

At least it is now everywhere's the same: completely fucked.

"Suppose it's fine if you have a pension or something," he muses. "Still a bit boring though. Otherwise, sooner or later you gotta move away to earn a living. Wasn't for my Playstation I'd go mad."

"Your mum will take care of you, Kyle. So don't you worry."

But Kyle wanted to earn his way, take care of himself in whatever way he could. And soon. The look in his eye told her so. He was a teenager on the brink of an uncertain manhood, stepping into an uncertain world, one that didn't want him, unless it was to exploit him, and all he had going for him was his spirit and his courage.

And then: "Hermione? Were Finn and Mum,... you know,... seeing

each other?"

"Not to my knowledge, love. What makes you think that?"

"On the phone,... she was,... well,... a bit loud, you know? Shouty. Telling him off. It sounded a bit like when she used to be with Dad."

Hermione swallows hard. Has Helena lied to her? Has she been sleeping with Finn? Is that why Finn hesitated to sleep with her? He was already sleeping with Helena! She thinks back over every conversation she's had with Finn and Helena, and this latest news doesn't compute. But why else would Helena be directing her infamously shouty voice down the telephone at Finn?

"Well, not sure about that, Kyle."

"Just wondered if they broke up and that's why he'd gone away?"

Hermione sits, takes a breath, admits this would make sense. "Look, Kyle, I know your mum likes Finn, 'cos she told me so, but not, you know, in that way – so far as I know. I mean not in a boyfriendy sort of way. Said he was a friend, like he's a friend to all of us, like Lionel's a friend. Now, drink your chocolate while it's hot."

Condescension again, Hermione. Stop treating this boy like an idiot.

The Pad pings. Notification from Trip-thing-dot-blob. She now has one review and four stars. "Clean Caff. Friendly. Great service, sea views, great nosh. Brilliant ride in."

Well, whoopeedoo.

Helena arguing with Finn on the telephone?

Bitch!

Chapter Thirty One

"So, Finn, you are still living with this Carina woman?"

It's eleven pm, and Finn is sleepy.

Helena on the line.

He'd driven home that morning from Carina's house, steeling himself for an excruciatingly awkward confrontation with Richard the bat wielder, except Richard had gone. Of course Finn might have expected he'd be out, gone to work, but more than that there was not a trace of him anywhere. This suggested he would not be coming back, and Finn was relieved. The house was empty - he was alone in it, and could not remember the last time that had happened. He might have been grateful for the peace, except today the silence told a different story, one he did not wish to dwell upon.

There was a stain on the tiles in the hall - two hundred quid a square meter tiles - his blood he supposed. He winced at the thought. Quite a lot of blood, too, and he wondered who'd cleaned it up. He'd had another visit from the cops, and they'd looked relieved when he'd said he wasn't interested in pursuing charges or anything, that it was all just a misunderstanding. Cops had other things to worry about these days, and in ever decreasing numbers.

Then he'd gone through the house, looking for traces of himself, but found not much more of himself than there was of Richard. Finn was mostly online anyway, all his essential documents at least. We were approaching the time, he supposed when people could simply be deleted when they were no longer of any use.

Helena was still waiting for his reply. "Finn?"

Finn was in bed, his old bed, the bed he'd shared with Kathleen, a nice bed - big, ornate, showy, like their lifestyle. And, like their lifestyle, ultimately shallow, because to the best of his memory they had never actually made love in it. He was realising too his basic frame bed at Carrickbar was more comfortable, that he slept better in it, woke more refreshed. Or was that more because he was better living on his own?

"Em,... what?"

"You are still living with this Carina woman?"

"I wasn't *living* with her. I mean not in that particular tone of voice. I was just,... *staying* with her for a bit. I'm back in my old place now, sorting some stuff out."

Except there was nothing to sort out really, nothing he could get his hands on anyway. His life here had turned to smoke.

Helena again: "Has bang on head damaged brain?"

"What? I,... I don't think so, nothing permanent at least. I still feel a bit sluggish. Not quite myself. And I've got a splitting headache all the time.;"

"Trust me. Brain is damaged. The Finn I know would not be so careless in letting his friends know he's okay. He would not leave it to this Carina woman to make his excuses for him."

"Em,... yes. Okay. Sorry about not getting in touch sooner. Carina,... yes,... I know. She's helped me out a lot, she's,... well, a good friend. "

"I don't care if she's shagging your brains out. But you have friends here also. And no news of you. Hermione is thinking you might be dead in a ditch, only I tell her the idea is ridiculous."

Finn did not take this news as a comfort - that people were concerned for him. He felt it more as an inconvenient burden, that people wanted to know about him. Sometimes he thought it would be nice to just go away where no one knew his name, and never asked it. Why was he thinking like that? Had he not just admitted to Carina he was in love,... with Hermione? But that was nonsense.

That was just,... loneliness.

"I was going to ring, honestly."

"Sure. So what happened between you and Hermione?"

"What? Nothing. Nothing happened,... I mean nothing I'm aware of. Has she said anything?"

"No one is saying anything, Finn. This is my problem. And why you stay with this Carina shrink woman anyway. Wife chuck you out?"

"That's a long story."

"I'm tired, Finn, so gist will do?"

"Kathleen's not,.... here. I mean. I suppose she'll be coming back at some point. I think she's in Shanghai for a few months. Or was it Singapore - doesn't matter. She's not here. She's never here, Helena, you know?"

"Supposing?"

"Supposing what?"

"You said this is what you are supposing. Does this mean you have not actually talked with Kathleen? Or does bang on head make you forget this also?"

"Richard mentioned it to Carina."

"Richard? Who is Richard, please?"

"He's Kathleen's,... em,... boss."

"And kids? Where are kids now? They are with you? Only I hear no loud music and whining in background."

"They're abroad now. Working. I,... I don't know where exactly. Paris, Frankfurt. God knows. Richard arranged it while I was away."

"Okay. So I calculate you home alone. When you come back to Carrickbar?"

He thought about this for a while, for a long while, so Helena thought he'd drifted off again. "Finn? When you come back?"

"To do what, Helena? Mend watches no one wants? Shut myself up in that little house, waiting to do what? What am I waiting for? To die? Carrickbar isn't exactly the most cheerful place for me right now. Carrickbar,... Carrickbar was just a mistake."

There was a pause and Finn imagined Helena was thinking on it, thinking of some suitably wise and persuasive reply. And he might have been persuaded by that, except this was Helena and what she was doing was building up a head of steam.

"Fuck that you goddam moron."

"Sorry?"

"Sorry? You goddam right you be sorry. Sorry son of bitch. But I forgive you. I understand I am talking to bang on head, and not real fucking Finn Finucane!" There was a pause for breath, then Helena came back more softly. "Apologies. Listen. You will also be there, at home, tomorrow evening?"

"I,... I guess so."

"Good. I call then. We talk some more."

Finn was shaken, unused to being aware he was having any effect at all on others, felt himself invisible, slipping through life without so much as raising a ripple on the emotionally stagnant mill pond of events. And suddenly Helena's screaming at him as if he were her husband caught with another woman's face in his trousers.

She was crazy.

Wonderful.

Wow!

And setting the phone back on the table, Finn realised she was right. He had become a bang on the head, unable to think, unable to see further than a day ahead. He hoped she'd be in a better mood when she called again, if she called, which he rather doubted, and hoped. Hoped she would not call again,... that she would leave him alone. And lonely. Lovely or not. The woman was like a wild animal.

Sex with her would be very physical, Finn, very exciting.

What?

Finn caught himself, a mental image of Helena riding him. How he'd loved to be ridden! And hard, and just imagine what it would be like with a woman like that! Although surprised by the feeling, he allowed himself the pleasure of it for a moment before sweeping it aside and clicking off the light. But,...

Imagination, Finn.

Carina was right.

It was much better than pornography.

Chapter Thirty Two

The next evening, Carina called after work with takeaways. Finn was glad for it. Carina was easier to be with than with any other woman; she didn't make demands of him -well other than the big one of jumping out of the life that was killing him. Other than that she just had a way of knowing the right thing to do and say at the right time, also which buttons to press in order to restore vision when he couldn't see straight. He'd cleaned himself up, put on a clean shirt, tidied the house a bit. He wanted to look decent for her. He wanted to look like he was regaining control, that her efforts to heal him were not in vain, that he was not a hopeless case, that he was making progress.

If you could call this progress.

"You can't stay here for long," she cautioned. "It's still Kathleen's house too. She'll be coming back and I doubt she'll want to find you in it, unless you have plans for a reconciliation."

"I'd not thought in terms of a reconciliation. Sort of discounted it, actually."

"Oh? Explain."

"Well, on the one hand, it doesn't sound like she'd be interested, and on the other,... "

"The other?"

"I find myself indifferent to the idea. Are you suggesting I should try to make it up?"

"Finn,.. I told you, I'm a psychotherapist. I suggest nothing. I merely provoke thought, and clearly you've already thought about this,... so,... "

"So,... I know I should have faced up to this sooner. If I'd told her I was unhappy, she might have found it easier to admit she was seeing Richard. And that would have made everything easier all round. I think I,..."

"What?"

"I think I would have been relieved."

"Hmm. Layers, Finn. This is good. Have you noticed we never say what we ought to say when it needs to be said? The world would be a much happier place if we did."

"You're right. It's guilt that holds us back though, isn't it? Or fear of being misunderstood."

"Fear and guilt, yes."

"And on that subject, can I say just one thing, without any layers, or fear or guilt. I stand here naked before you."

"Now there's a thought. Except I've seen so many naked men, though granted most of those were on a mortuary slab. And you're not standing. You're sitting."

"Can we be serious for a moment?"

"Sorry."

"I just want to say thank you. For taking the time,.. with me."

"Oh,.. don't thank me. You're not out of the woods yet. But I'm more hopeful than I was this time last year."

"Well, that's good."

"Worries me what you said though,..."

"About?..."

"Being in love with Hermione."

"Ah,.."

"What do you plan on doing,... about that?"

Probably the same he'd been doing about it his whole life, he thought, which was: "Probably nothing."

"Okay. So,... you're in control then?"

"Control? That's a laugh, isn't it. But like I said, no sense in leading her

on if I'm unable to commit myself to a relationship, one hundred percent."

"Good." Or you're just too scared, she thought. "Because she sounds like a decent person."

"She is."

There came a rapping at the door, then a pinging of the bell. They looked at one another, both of them thinking their being together might easily be misconstrued, but only if the caller was Kathleen, and wouldn't she have a key? Carina snuggled back - interesting, her reaction. Some guilt there. Was there a chance she'd been harbouring thoughts of staying over? Of getting her hands in Finn's pants now Kathleen was out of the picture?

Hands in Finn's pants, Carina?

No way!

"Your house," she said. "You answer it."

So, Finn answered cautiously to find Helena on the doorstep, small wheely suitcase beside her. Fur hat, fur coat, imperious air. "Fucking trains, Finn. I have been twelve hours. Twelve fucking hours. Imagine that! I cross entire Soviet Union in less time, and more comfortable. Believe me. You British. You want kick up arse. Take bag please? What? You look surprised. I said I call."

"But,... I thought you meant on the telephone."

Helena brushed past him, pausing only to touch her fingers lightly to the fresh scar on his temple. "I know. So,... this is nice house Finn. Why you leave such nice house?"

Helena's fingers felt soft upon his skin. Their touch left a ring of ripples, spreading, and a sweetness in his gut. Seeing her moved him. "Em,... how's Kyle?"

"Kyle is well, thank you. Tonight he has home alone with Playstation and Pot Noodle. He is happy teenager. I hope I am not inconveniencing anything."

Helena entered the living room to find Carina, relaxed and watching

her. Helena took a breath. "Ah! You are Kathleen, please? I must know quickly. Then I spare all misunderstandings."

Carina felt a glow at Helena's candour, laughed a little. "No, I'm Carina."

"Ah,... you are Carina the shrink woman? I have heard about you."

Carina nodded, keeping her eyes fixed upon Helena's. "And you'll be Helena, the Russian. I've also heard about you."

Helena bit her tongue, looked aside to Finn, directing one arched eyebrow at him. Finn hastened to explain: "Em,... Helena's from Georgia, actually. Different place altogether."

Carina nodded, slow nods, eyes resting lightly upon Helena's face - Doctor Carina, diagnostic, curious. She saw the dark rings under the makeup, lids a little puffy lids, the high colour showing through, the moist brow. Infection? Menopause? She saw too Finn's submissive manner in her presence and did not like it. But Finn was simply that kind of guy, and she had to admit there probably wasn't a lot she could do about that. It just rendered him vulnerable, especially to women like Helena

And her.

The coat was opened as if with ceremony to present Helena's lithe body in a short skirt, stockinged legs and heels. Carina felt at once disadvantaged in her crumpled work-suit and day old deodorant. Interesting, she thought. But then any time she was not analysing others, she was analysing herself.

Helena used her body well.

Possessed a body that was worth using.

It excites Finn.

But he fears it.

And his fear might just save him from it.

Helena continued to command: "Take coat please, Finn."

Finn fussed around, nervous, unable still to quite believe in Helena's materialisation. "And hat Finn. Thank you."

Helena sat and from the hallway where he hung the coat and hat, Finn heard her say. "I will be staying the night. Is this a problem for you, Carina?"

Finn dropped the hat, picked it up and secured it gently on the peg. It felt expensive, sable or something - soft to touch, exquisite. It sent a tingle through him, starting with his palms and running directly to what he could only describe as his loins - at least,... it had his testicles tingling. And he wondered about that.

Carina answered cautiously. "Finn and I, we're friends, Helena, former,... colleagues. Not lovers."

And Helena's equally careful reply. "I am also friend of Finn. We have no love life. Absolutely. So, we are all friends together. How,... lovely?"

And Finn felt like a child, returning to the women, who both looked up at him, and he didn't know what else to say, so he said, rather lamely: "Em,... tea?"

Chapter Thirty Three

Hermione is cleaning the coffee machine when two motorcycles thump sedately up to the café. They're what in olden parlance she supposed would once have been called choppers. There's probably a modern name for them now but it eludes her. The riders run their bikes onto the pavement and kick them back onto their stands. Another bike appears, an old Norton, shiny beyond what is feasible for such an ancient machine in the depths of January. So,... three guys, two beardy, one baldy, and all of them grey. They appear to know one another, shake hands in greeting with the Norton man. The door bell jingles. Polite greetings to Hermione as they enter.

More gentlemen disguised as trolls.

The order is for coffees all round, one egg and bacon barm and two full fry ups. She notes the 'please' and the unselfconscious use of 'love' as a term of respect and endearment.

Nice.

Her ear for accents suggest to her these men have travelled from Yorkshire.

Then it's Squinty for his pies.

Squinty takes the barstool and keeps a beady eye on the incomers, keeps the other of course on Hermione's tits. He's quieter than usual, does not even ask for a cup of tea, nor does Hermione volunteer one - all the quicker she thinks to be rid of him.

"'Sup then John. Not much to say for yourself this mornin'."

There comes a burst of good natured laughter from the table by the window. Squinty gives a grimace of disapproval. Another joke is shared, illustrated with hand gestures. More laughter. The born-agains are settling in.

She surmises Squinty dislikes foreignness, surmises also that foreignness to Squinty is anything or anyone not from Carrickbar. He does not elaborate upon his displeasure, and she does not enquire. To her surprise he leans suddenly close enough for her to smell the breakfast on his breath - or come to think of it, several breakfasts. She resists the urge to draw back. Then, with a knowing tilt of the head, he

says. "Need anything, you just call me, you know? I'm only down the road."

"That's kind of you John. Sure I can manage, though."

Squinty nods, taps the side of his nose, wonders about the tea but instead cradles his pies like puppies, and shambles away.

There is more laughter, another joke, a tale of the road that involves a squashed hedgehog and a policeman's helmet. Hermione cracks a smile. More toast is requested. Another round of coffees. She tends to her men-children.

"Come far have you boys?"

They have indeed travelled far, travelled from Yorkshire, like she thought, but this takes less time than she's imagined, at least on a fast bike, ridden with a cautious disregard for the speed limit. It's a good run on a bike, says one. Good scenery. She's heard this before. The payoff is the sea, says another, the best stretch of beach in this part of the world. She does not mention the mountains of crap washed up after a high sea and a stiff easterly, nor the radioactive caesium from the Sellafield reprocessing plant. She does not want to disillusion them – enough disillusionment in the world already without her adding to it.

Used to stay here as a kid, says the other.

She's heard this one before as well, a few times now, wonders about it, wonders if it's a middle aged thing, this desire to return to the scenes of childhood, to search out the paths not taken. She returns to her counter, ponders more at length with the aid of her pad.

Carrickbar will never be the place it was. Eight hundred quid a week for a caravan? A thousand for a mouldy room in the King James, even at its peak of allure in the olden days. If you had a choice between that and a package to the Med - even with Pounds Sterling all shot to bits - well, which would you choose? Sure it'll never be what it was, but can it not be something else instead?

It doesn't matter what, so long as it's,...

Something good.

The biker boys are leaving now, parting smiles and waves as they

squash their silver heads inside their skid-lids. She tells them to ride safely, and she means it. Takings for the morning are now thirty one pounds, including Squinty's pies, and something of a record.

Squinty.

Is he in love with her?

Shit, she'd not thought of that!

Oh, please no,...

You'd think men would grow out of such things. But no matter what their age, once granted freedom from all responsibility, they invariably revert to adolescence. I mean look at Finn. No,... she'd rather not think of Finn, but there he pops unbidden, again.

The man doesn't add up; fled his responsibilities, ran out on wife and kids. How manly was that? But they didn't need him, did they? His boys were men, his wife,... his wife shagging her boss, according to Helena. So, it was more that he'd outstayed his welcome, or cut himself adrift to avoid getting smashed to pieces in the wake of something bigger than he was.

She understood that. That's why she'd come to Carrickbar too!

Carina?

Not his wife.

Psychiatrist, did she say? Psychoanalyst? Psychotherapist? A friend - close enough for him to sleep at her house, close enough for her to mend his banged head, read his messages and missed calls? Oh let's not do this again, Hermione! Just ring him up for fuck's sake and ask if he's okay.

Be sweet with him.

And then she's remembering Kyle yesterday, and stories of Helena arguing with Finn on the telephone? Shouting at him? And Finn injured?

Lovers.

If they weren't lovers now, they were bound to be sooner or later - because only lovers shouted at one another. Hermione drums her nails on the counter, thoughtfully, remembering she'd given Helena Finn's address.

Idiot!

Strange one, Helena. Scheming. Lived through violence and killing. It puts a different spin on things for sure. For Helena it's about survival, about using her wiles and her legs if necessary to snare an equally wily Englishman for his passport. And so what if it hasn't worked out - she didn't seem too cut up about it. She's moved on, she's protecting the only thing that means anything to her at all: and that's Kyle.

You will be his mother, Hermione. Finn his father.

And Helena does not strike her as being a metaphorical kind of person.

Hermione stops drumming.

Chapter Thirty Four

It was impulse that had Carina embracing Finn. He'd read that right, at least he thought he had. She'd hugged him first like a man, then squeezed his shoulders, again in a firm, manly way, then softened it with an affectionate, sisterly peck on the cheek. It was going up for midnight and they were on the driveway, under a cold sky, standing by Carina's car - the door already open on her departure. Her scent was intoxicating, warming, thrilling, and he did not want to let her go,... this the only woman he felt safe with.

"You'll take care, won't you Finn?" she said.

Finn wasn't sure what she meant by that. Take care? Had he not spent his whole life taking care? It hadn't done him much good, had it? Life had a way of pulling the rug from under you, no matter how carefully you tried to stand on it.

"Sure," he said. "I'll call you tomorrow."

"No."

"No?"

"Give it a week or two. See how things work out, then let me know."

"Things?"

"You and Helena."

"Carina,... Helena and I,..."

"I know,... it's not like that between you. And I know you both think that's true. But she's come all this way to see if you're okay. And I know you're thinking about that, as I am. She's a tough one. Resourceful, resilient. *Dominating.* So be careful."

"I'm safe, I think."

"You think?"

"There's nothing I have that she wants."

"I was thinking the same thing. What would a wealthy ageless beauty

like that be wanting with an ageing, useless, unemployed loser like you."

"Thanks. Better go find out, I suppose."

Carina nodded. Another peck on the cheek, a tug of his sleeve, and she was gone, gunning her little racing car and purring off into the night. Then Finn turned to face the house, took a deep breath and went back inside.

She was sitting as she had been all evening - upright, feet tucked, ankles crossed, head serenely balanced, like royalty, like an old fashioned lady. She smiled to see him, relaxed, lounged more comfortably. It had been an act then, a pretence for Carina, her best face for the shrink lady.

"I like her," she said.

"Carina? Yes. Good."

"And she likes me also, I think. This is unusual for first impressions. Most women hate me. I don't mind this of course and it can be useful. But Carina disarms me."

"Carina finds very little to dislike in anyone. And it's her job,... to be disarming."

"Ah yes, even the worst of people she will find interesting. Obviously you are in love with her. Really, this is very plain to me."

Helena was testing, as he'd known she would. She'd gained little from conversation with Carina, so now she was relying on a breach of Finn's flimsy defences in order to fill in the blanks.

"I do love Carina, yes. Very much. But am I *in* love with her? No. Why not? Perhaps it's that I choose not to allow it."

"Oh? You think we can choose?"

"Of course we can. Well, I mean, do *you* believe in true love, Helena?"

Helena blinked, looked aside, unprepared for the tables to be turned so easily. Finn on the attack? A curious phenomenon, but not unpleasant. Perhaps his confidence came from being on home

territory? "Of course not," she said. "We can always choose our lovers, short or long term. But I did not expect to hear you say this. I had taken you for more of a Romantic, Finn."

"Maybe twenty years ago. Nowadays, I prefer a book for company, or a vintage wristwatch - preferably broken. And Carina's very self contained, a bit aloof. She'll never marry, and will be perfectly happy. Carina may even be one of those rare individuals who discovers the meaning of life and can explain it to the rest of us."

"Yes, all of that is very interesting Finn, but have you never,...?" Helena wobbled her eyes suggestively.

Finn sighed. "No. We never did that."

"No? Why not?"

"Well, it's like you and me, isn't it?"

"You and me?"

"No sense in spoiling something by making each other into objects of desire, as pleasant as that might seem in the shorter term. Better to be friends, eh? Friendships last longer than lovers, or even marriages."

He paused, Carina had said that. He was even beginning to talk like her, now.

Helena gave him a serene smile, a calculated cooling, a return to the offensive. But playfully. "Please rest assured, I have never desired you, Finn."

"Ouch. Okay, I asked for that one. Look, I'm very glad to see you, but,... well,... there's no delicate way of asking this, but what the hell are you doing here?"

"This is how he thanks me? I came to see how you were. Obviously."

Both knew this was not entirely true. Finn knew it because he read it in Helena's eyes, and in the deliberately coquettish turn of her head when she said it. So, maybe she'd get around to telling him at some point her real reason. In the mean time, he said: "Thank you. I'm not feeling too bad now."

"Your head is a mess." She indicated his temple by touching her own. "The cut, it looks,... ugly."

"Looks worse than it is. There's still some swelling. After the stitches, they used a kind of glue on it. It'll wear off on its own, and I'll be good as new."

"They had to glue your head together? What happened, Finn? You did not walk into a door. You did not crash your car. Somebody did this to you?"

"It's just the skin was broken, the skin they glued, not my head. It was a baseball bat. Gavin's I think. I remember how he whined about getting one for weeks and weeks. Had it years and never used it. Maybe I should have held out a bit longer, saved myself being eventually hit over the head with it."

"I'm sorry Finn, I think the banged head is talking at me again. Gavin is who?"

"My youngest."

"Your son hit you with a baseball bat?"

"No, no,... I told you, they're away,... gone,... apparently: Paris, Frankfurt. It was Kathleen's boss. He thought I was an intruder. He was waiting for me when I came home."

"Kathleen's boss was here?"

"Staying here, yes."

"And Kathleen?"

"Away. Still is."

"But she and her boss?"

"Richard. Yes,.. apparently they've been,..."

"Fucking behind your back?"

"Seeing each other,... it's been going on for a while I think. I had no idea."

It surprised Finn still how calm he could be when he said this. He was waiting for the crash, but the void just kept on opening up as he fell. Or maybe he simply didn't care.

Helena gave her head a little shake in self congratulation, then said, and only half under her breath: "I always knew this."

Finn wondered how she could possibly have known it. If he'd been a little more worldly wise, might he have surmised it himself? It certainly explained a lot that had been mysterious to him before. But what interested him more right now was: "How did you get my address? I was very careful not to give it to anyone. "

"We noticed that. You are secretive man, Finn. You are fucking enigma. Hermione let me have it."

"But how did Hermione get it?"

"She found it in your wallet when you lost it. Why have you not called her, Finn?"

"But,.. that would mean she wrote it down,..."

"I suppose so."

His wallet? Was there anything else in there that might have been embarrassing? Hardly. What was most embarrassing about his life was on plain display - no need for it to be hiding in his wallet.

"Why would she write down my address? My address here?"

"Obviously in case you ran away and we wanted to get in touch with you."

"But,.."

"It doesn't matter, Finn. Why have you not called her?"

Called her?

"I,... I suppose I should have called her, but I felt a bit awkward."

"Because of this thing that did not happen between you?"

"You *know* about that?"

"Sure. Hermione and I are best friends now. We share everything."

Finn was intrigued. He'd rather had the impression Hermione was very cool towards Helena.

"Finn, listen, it does not matter what you say to her. Even if it comes out wrong and in the worst possible way. It matters only that you say *something*. Even 'hello' will do. This woman feels romantically about you. Don't make her resent you for that. Trust me, love can sour to hate very quickly."

"You're wrong. Hermione doesn't feel,... romantically about me at all, not in the way you're thinking."

"And why not? Perhaps she is less discerning than me, and more open. But mainly, I think, it is because she chooses you. You also have a choice of course. So, you will drive me home tomorrow?"

"Home?"

"To Carrickbar. We go to the Sea View Café. You buy coffee all round and apologise to Hermione for being a dick. I will cover for you, say your head was muddled. With a scar like that she is bound to be sympathetic."

Is that really why Helena had come? To bring him back? Why she would ever think he'd do that? Why would he drive her home, since he'd not asked her to come here in the first place - except it had been twelve hours on a train and she looked worn out. Of course he'd do it. She was a hard woman to refuse anything.

"No," he said.

"No? Ooh, Finn, I admit I find this assertive refusal thrilling, I think. But you must be prepared for my assertions coming back at you, and I'm not sure you are up to them. What you mean, no?"

"I mean not tomorrow. It's late. Why not rest, lie in a bit tomorrow. I'll drive you home the day after. Is that okay?"

"Ah, yes, Finn. This is acceptable. Or perhaps we have a few days to

rest? In return I play housewife for you." She laughed, let out all the tension with it: "I did not know how to get you back. I had wondered about seduction - you should see my underwear right now. I thought then: he will do anything, after a night with me. But it would also have complicated things, I mean at some point having to explain this to Hermione. But then I thought, no. Finn is a gentleman. All I need do is ask if he will take me home, and he will do it."

"Well, I'm glad to have spared you the ultimate sacrifice, Helena. But I won't be staying in Carrickbar very long. A night maybe. Then I'll be coming right back here."

"But you have six months to run on the lease. I know this because I fed Lionel exquisite puddings and cakes and whiskey at Christmas, and he told me everything happily without remembering afterwards what he said. Come back for six months, until the lease runs out, then decide."

"I don't know. I'm not sure what I'll do, Helena. In truth I'm waiting for a miracle. But Carrickbar no longer feels right for me. It feels like a mistake."

Helena looked around the living room, took in the middle class faux opulence: the furnishings, the tech, the fancy lights, the carpet at forty quid a square meter. "I understand your feelings Finn, but you have already lost this place. And perhaps Carrickbar has more to offer than you think."

That Helena loved Finn was plain, even to him. It was as plain as the look in her eyes and the warmth of her smile. But they had already broken this ice a long time ago and lovers they were not, in spite of Finn's occasionally prurient speculations to the contrary.

"Shall I show you to your room?"

"Yes please."

He wasn't sure which room to put her in. There was a guest room, but that was filled with discarded junk the boys had grown bored with - the rowing machine, the drum-kit, the old guitars, the football table,.. which left the main bedroom, and two others belonging to the boys. But the latter stank of old trainers, body odour and hormones, to the extent that even Finn could not contemplate spending a night in there - Helena would be appalled by it - which left the main bedroom. He changed the sheets, put her in there. Then he took a duvet and a

pillow down to the living room for himself.

"Good night, Finn."

"Goodnight, Helena."

He lay on the sofa, lay awake most of the night, his headache returning intermittently. And while he lay there he wondered if Helena would come down, scantily clad to seduce him, like women always do in the movies, that even though she had been joking about it, she might also have meant it, perhaps in a small way. But she did not. In the morning, he would have to ask about Kyle. Kyle was the only person who meant anything to her. Everyone else, including herself, was simply a means to an end.

But she was also wise.

Yes, he had already lost this house. And yes, perhaps Carrickbar offered more than he could see, if he could only convince himself it was right to want it.

Chapter Thirty Five

Hermione is sweeping the floor and polishing the coffee machine. It's late afternoon and, after a wet, grey, relentlessly cold sort of day, the sun, only moments from setting, is painting a sudden eerie gloaming over the town. She pauses and looks over as it slips from behind thick cloud to touch the sea, a single jewel of orange incandescence that sets the window panes of the promenade buildings afire.

Beautiful.

Not a bad day's takings, either: pension day, plus several more gentlemen bikers who'd read the online reviews left by other gentlemen bikers, and thought it worth braving the sluicing wet on that apparently lovely, long curving bit of road. She's feeling more positive on account of them. Now she's contemplating a bath and an unhealthy evening with crisps, wine and soaps, in celebration.

Then the door jingles and a girl walks in. Hermione freezes.

It's the dead girl from the beach.

But that's impossible.

"Hello," says the girl.

Foreign accent, eastern European, very young, very nervous. She's shivery cold too, and soaked to the skin, as if freshly risen from the sea. Do ghosts feel the cold?

"Hi,.... darlin'. C,... can I get you something?"

The girl is holding out a picture, a picture of herself, except it can't be herself because she's dead. "Please. Have you seen this person?"

If Hermione was not already so porcelain pale from the makeup, she would be sure to give herself away, then gives herself away anyway in the hesitation,... "I,.."

"My sister. I am looking for my sister. You have seen her, please?"

Hermione's heart falls to her stomach. The dead girl's sister? She tries to piece the story together in her head. Whichever way she runs it, the tears are threatening to rise. "I,... Oh, God,.. love,..."

The girl is telling her now the last word she had from her sister was November, from somewhere near Carrickbar. Her words are spilling out fast, desperate. She has a look of hopeless automation about her, as if she's asked this question a hundred times already today and is expecting the same answer. She's so appallingly young to be alone and so far from home.

Hermione sits. "I've,... seen her," she says. Her heart is beating in her forehead now. "Tell me quick now, darlin' Are you here on a passport? Got a visa and everything,... or?..."

The girl looks confused. "Yes. Yes. I am,... citizen of European Union. There are no restrictions for me. Well, not yet, I suppose. The situation is unclear but,... you have seen my sister. Really?"

Hermione sits the girl down, tells her she thinks her sister may be dead. Then, while the girl absorbs that, pale faced and silent, Hermione calls the cops. She imagines there'll be flashing blue lights and roaring helicopters in a moment, all rushing to the poor girl's aid, but instead they're told by a professionally polite but disinterested voice to report to the station in Weston. The girl is quaking and crying now. Her hands are cold, she's been walking about for days with her photograph and waning optimism, slept last night under the tarpaulin of a boat down in the harbour - a boat she says that stank of fish and weed.

And not seaweed.

Hermione returns to comfort her. "It's all right 'darlin. Let's get you warmed up a bit. Then I'll drive you to see the cops. Okay?"

"My sister is really dead?"

"Think so, love. I'm sorry. Cops'll tell us for sure if it was her. Okay?"

"Cops?"

"Not in any trouble are you? I mean,... no offence, but best to know. I mean before talking to cops. Sometimes it's easier for them beat up on the unfortunate, rather than deal with the really bad people."

The girl is shaking her head. "No trouble. I am looking for my sister. She said there might be work. How do you know my sister?"

How do you tell someone you found their sister drowned on the beach? How do you soften it? Do you tell them later? Or you tell them now?

"She was on the beach. Think she must have drowned. Me and a,... friend, we found her. That's how I recognised the picture. Looks like her. You look like her. Sorry, Darlin'. She might have been workin' with gangs out on the cockle beds. It's dangerous work if you've not the local knowledge. Fast tides and all that. I'll take you to see the cops. I'll stay with you. I'll help you any way I can."

The girl takes a deep breath, stiffens, nods. All is in control. "Thank you."

"Want to call anyone? Parents maybe?"

"Parents are dead." The girl looks to the warmer where a few pies remain unsold, unwanted. "They look like they have travelled a long way," she says. "Like me."

"Want one?"

The girl shakes her head.

Hermione forces a smile. Insulting her pies isn't the best way to win her friendship, but the girl's just been told her sister's dead, so she's inclined to cut her a bit of slack. "Factory made," she admits. "Not great, I agree. Only buy them in for one customer, and anything of better quality would be wasted on him."

The girl eyes the cabinet of chocolate and cream fancies. "Cakes are factory made also?"

"Most. Hard to turn a profit making your own these days, unless you charge a fortune. And I'm not that good a baker. Anyway, come on. I'll shut up shop, then we'll see what the cops have to say."

The girl realises her insensitivity, insulting the quality of pies and cakes, says she is sorry, says her name is Anica, then begins to shake and cry again. Hermione holds her. "How old are you anyway, Darlin?"

Anica tells her she is twenty one.

"More like sixteen, I'd say."

The girl stiffens, presses herself away, controls herself once more and they compromise on eighteen. That's fine, thinks Hermione. Eighteen will do. "If you need a place to stay for a bit, you can stay here with me. No more sleeping out. Okay?"

Whatever happened, she's thinking, this girl will not be working in the estuary, grubbing in the mud for cockles for the slave gangs. This girl will be kept safe.

"You've no bag with you? No stuff?"

Anica shakes her head. "This was stolen in Manchester. I have a little money, and passport only. In pocket. Also photograph."

Hermione determines the priorities. The girl must eat, the girl must shower because she's a bit smelly, and she must change her clothes because they're wet and she's been wearing them without a change for days. Then they'll drive to Weston, save the cops their petrol in doing their job by sending someone to Carrickbar. She'll need some underwear - Supermarket at Weston - ditto jeans and sneaks and some tee shirts, and a handful of toiletries, and a bag. The girl will want to pay even though she's probably barely got change for a bus ride, and Hermione won't let her.

"I can pay," says Anica. She's wearing only a towel now, standing on the rug in Hermione's bathroom. "I have credit card."

"You can't," says Hermione. "Credit card's not the same as money, love. Dint nobody ever tell you that? Besides, it's my place to help. Me and Finn."

"Finn?"

Hermione screws her eyes up tight. Where the hell had that one come from? "Friend. A guy. We,... it's like,... we owe it to your sister. Your coming here. I want to help you because we couldn't help her."

Anica persists. "Finn?"

"Just some stupid guy,... he's gone now. Probably never see him again. Forget I mentioned him."

"All right. But I will pay."

Hermione thinks for a moment, hands Anica some spare pants and a shirt. She's a proud one. Tough. Dignified. Like a younger Helena Aynslea. "Maybe we can work something out. Okay?"

"Thank you,... Her-ni-no-me? A curious name."

"It's Her-mi-o-ni, but easier to call me Minnie, eh?"

The shadow of a smile passes over Anica's face, then she catches herself and starts shaking again. Poor kid. Is she even up to talking to the cops?

"Where you from anyway?"

"Romania. Long way from here."

"That's Carrickbar, darlin'. Long way from anywhere."

"There is money here?"

"You mean like boom-time? Jobs? Streets paved with gold n'all that? No Darlin'. Nothing here. More money in Romania, most like - no disrespect. Whyn't you go to London like everyone else?"

"London is bad place for poor people. Like all cities. Girls tricked into doing bad things. My sister said to stay away from London. I'd hoped,..."

Hope, did she say? Hermione's thinking there's not much of that left either, but she's doing the best she can. "I know, Love. I'm sorry."

None of this would change anything. The sun would still rise in the morning and Anica's sister would still be dead.

But on the other hand she and Anica are still alive.

And that’s got to mean something!

Chapter Thirty Six

Finn spent a restless night on the sofa, imagining he'd been awake the whole time, only to find himself roused gently around dawn by the pressure of Helena's hand on his arm.

"Finn, darling?"

She was kneeling beside him - silk robe, cotton nightdress, hair brushed and shining. Helena without makeup, he thought, was as dramatically beautiful as Helena with.

"So, you would like coffee?" she asked. "Sorry for early wakening."

"It's okay. Em,.. yes, coffee will be nice." He pushed himself upright. "Let me make it."

"No." She pressed him gently back, and Finn enjoyed submitting to her. And at the same time he wondered what the difference was between Helena and Kathleen, why he had never felt this way about Kathleen, this same preciousness, this same glittering awe. Or had he, once, in the long ago? And how was it Helena made him feel so big all the time, when Kathleen managed to make him feel so small?

"Is fine," she said. "I am housewife for you, remember? You are no sugar and no milk? Yes?"

"How did you know?"

"Hermione. She tells me. You spend a lot of time in the cafe, Finn. Something attracts you there? Or someone?"

Yes, there was something about the Sea View Cafe that attracted him - Hermione, of course, but more than that, it was what she was building, the sparkle of it, the sheer irreverent optimism in the face of inevitable ruin, like that fancy little biscuit she'd put at the side of his coffee the first day. It was a show of sorts, but not false.

Hermione really meant it.

It was just,... futile.

"You talked about me?"

"Don't be alarmed, or flattered. Everyone in Carrickbar talks about you. Everyone talks about everyone else. It's all there is to do in small seaside town."

This wasn't exactly the answer he'd wanted, and he wasn't sure it was true anyway. It was just a smokescreen she was putting up to hide the fact she and Hermione had swapped enough intelligence on the subject of Finn Finucane they both knew how he liked his coffee.

While Helena made herself busy in the kitchen, he drifted back to the subject of Kathleen, a subject brought up by the sheer contrasting electricity of Helena. His had been a functional marriage, he supposed. Both he and Kathleen were products of the post eighties world of utilitarian commerce, a world that pretended there was no social dimension to life at all, that love or indeed any other human emotion, being impossible to compute, did not actually exist. They'd both been good at their work - Kathleen still was - but Finn had been punctured by the emptiness of it. And the fruit of their union? A pair of equally unthinking, unfeeling master calculators.

When they could be bothered that is.

Helena returned with coffee, shivered and eyed the duvet under which Finn was still snug. "House is cold, Finn. Budge up."

She took the opposite end of the sofa, slid beneath the duvet, slid her legs alongside his, her bare feet suddenly cold against his thigh and causing an immediate erection which he found both surprising and reassuring. Helena seemed not to notice.

"Better," she said.

"Em,... hope you weren't cold last night."

"Your bed is very warm place, Finn." She smirked suggestively. Finn blushed.

Then, as if it had been listening, the heating clicked on, keen to do Helena's bidding, but Finn hoped the house wouldn't be too quick in warming because he was enjoying her casual, cosy proximity.

She settled back against the arm of the sofa, then froze suddenly as if in pain, closed her eyes tight, drew breath. "Ohh!"

"Helena?"

Her eyes still closed, she licked her dry lips. "It is just a little pain. Passing now." She opened her eyes, smiled her reassurances, then thought for a moment, read the concern in him: "I,... have foreign object in muscle of back, low down, near spine. Mostly I forget is there, so it reminds me sometimes."

"Foreign object?"

She sighed. No easy way to explain: "Is piece of bullet from gun of separatist militia."

"From the civil war?"

"Yes. Is better now. It passes. Don't worry for me."

"When was this?"

"This was 1992. What you know of Georgian civil war? Likely nothing much. Who remembers this now?"

"I,... remember seeing bits of it on the BBC. You were caught up in that?"

"Caught up? Such an understated and polite way of putting it. Yes, I was,... caught up. I am teenager. Is not enough we run, leave behind our homes, cars, money, every fucking thing. I am shot in back as well. Bullet also take kidney - on this side. I have unpleasant scar. I show you sometime? Doctor was actually vetinarian, and in great hurry, but saved my life. I keep splinter of bullet in return for missing kidney. This is not fair exchange, I know, but still, I am lucky. Those who did not run, died. No, I rephrase: they did not die - died is too small a word for what happened to them. Anyway,... I think train journey yesterday has woken this splinter up. It reminds me of what I'd sooner forget."

"Helena,..."

"I am fine. I live half my life already with this thing. It is not new to me."

"Fuck,..."

"Language, Finn!"

"But,... can't it be taken out?"

"Of course, yes. But there also is risk to this procedure, and I am not prepared for it."

"What risk?"

"At last checking, there is paralysis from waist down, life in wheelchair, also death. These are not inconsequential outcomes. I wish not to lose my life, my legs, to say nothing of my pussy."

"And if you do nothing?"

"Occasional pain, for which there is medication, but which also makes me ill, makes me dopey and sweaty and out of breath, and a little crazy sometimes, so I do not take it and hope for the best. Mostly I am fine. Also there is small question of explaining to doctors of National Health Service I have bullet in my back, and who put it there. This I think will cause much fuss and paperwork. You must not tell anyone what I have told you."

"I won't tell anyone. But if I can help, let me know."

"I think you say this because you think there is nothing you can do."

"It's possible there's nothing I can do, that's true. But it's not why I'm saying it."

"Okay, so,... if there is something I want from you, no matter how big, you will give it?"

Finn thought about this. His brain wasn't great first thing in the morning, even before his run in with Richard and the baseball bat, and he knew he had to be careful with Helena. He had to be cautious. She was warming him up for something.

"That's not quite what I was meaning," he said. "But okay, yes, of course I'll do anything for you,... so long as it's legal."

Helena looked hurt. "Legal? What is this legal? Just because I look like gangster's tart, does not mean I am criminal. I am decent, law abiding British citizen."

And just to cover all the bases, he added: "Also, I'm not marrying you."

"Pfft,... as if. So, nothing illegal, and not marriage to Helena, though she adores you, Finn. Okay? Feel safe now?" She leaned forward, offered him her hand to shake, to seal the deal. Finn, shook it. As he did so, Helena's forearm discovered the probing alertness of Finn's erection from where it hid beneath the duvet. She raised an eyebrow, sat up. "Oh? You want we do something about that?"

Finn shifted awkwardly, squirmed, embarrassed. "Sorry. It's just,... the usual morning thing. Please ignore it,... "

"Hmm! Long time since I had sex, you know? I like you Finn. This is no problem for me. No problem for you also, I think. So, just say if you want to. But I am hoping to save you for Hermione, and it will be awkward if she finds me out because I want to make special friends with her, and she is difficult to convince of the sincerity of my love. Listen, I get dressed now. You will take me shopping in town today?"

"Okay."

"You are not afraid to be recognised with me?"

"It's a big town. Nobody knows me. And of course any man would be flattered to be seen with you."

"Ah Finn, you have moments of great charm. I think also it is your fault nobody knows you. You think all your life nobody wants to know you. So, you are lonely man. Let us fix this for you."

"Us?"

"You have friends Finn. Come back to Carrickbar and be with them. Take care of us. And let us take care of you. We are all orphans there, all castaways. And we love you. You know your neighbours here?"

"What?"

"In this sleepy dormitory place. You wash your car? You cut your grass? You know your neighbours?"

"Hardly ever speak to them."

"Then nobody loves you here." She rose gracefully, shook out her hair, rubbed the small of her back, then cast him a backwards smile. "In

Carrickbar, we are all in love with you. Where then do you most belong, Finn. Don't forget your coffee."

He closed his eyes as the warm wash of something passed through him. It was an aliveness, and a fear, yes. Dealing with Helena was like dealing with a nuclear bomb - safe to handle only until it went off, and then the effects were devastating, though largely imagined because it had yet to happen. He was too meek, of course. He would do anything she asked. He could only hope therefore she saw also the coward in him, and would not ask too much. For only then could he be assured of not letting her down.

Life.

She was talking about life, about friends, and more generally about people. Yes, he had known people once, known them here, in and around Aylesbury, but the life he had led had also progressively isolated him from them, and Helena was right, perhaps he'd allowed it, even conspired in his own gradual imprisonment in the soft cell of his loneliness.

Starting afresh, all be it so briefly, in Carrickbar, a forgotten place where no one had known him, he'd been quick to discover the ease with which people seek to connect. It was a natural process, and it might have been worth returning to for that alone, except how long before he cut them all adrift, like before, became holed up, a grey, dusty old man, living in a backstreet on the edge of nowhere? Wife gone, kids gone, mending watches that beat out an imprecise time and which nobody wanted?

Chapter Thirty Seven

John (Squinty) Mulligan checked his watch. He needed a good four hours to make the round trip, including an hour's fishing, so he set out before dawn, early enough to see the soft amber light come on in the flat above the cafe and a figure appear at the window. As the boat chugged away from the harbour, riding a flat calm due west, he brought the glasses to bear, thought maybe to catch Hermione in her nightdress, or better still,....

Wait,...

Sure, there was definitely a figure at the window - dark hair, maybe even nude.

"Fuckin-ell!"

The binoculars wouldn't focus any better. Squinty ran his gloved fingertip desperately around the lenses, but this made them smeary, and by the time he'd found the window again, the light, and the figure, had gone.

"Bugger."

Further out, the boat picked up the rhythm of the sea, and Squinty turned his mind to other things. Clear of the harbour, clear of the shore, he brought up the sail - red sail, white pennant to read the wind, and continued west. There was hardly a breath worth the sail, but that was fine. The sail made him more visible for the rendezvous. Last time the sea had been a churn of grey which had made things difficult; he definitely wanted it flat this time for the morning's business.

Hunting and fishing, that was Squinty Mulligan. Ducks out on the marsh, and a bit of sea fishing. These were time honoured things, and manly, no harm in them, as was the occasional squeeze of a woman's arse. And as was the way of things, it was always the rarer game that bore the greater attraction.

Squinty would be sixty soon, and it was a long time since he'd beheld the riper fruits of nature, except on those occasions when he went to Manchester and paid for it. But paying for it was hardly the same. Still, a man could dream. With luck he'd be back by lunch for his usual shuffle up to the cafe. The pies were poor, but Hermione was always an eyeful of freshness, and the banter with her, or sometimes even the

sharp edge of her tongue when he went too far, was always worth the sport.

In his father's day they'd made their own pies at the cafe. There'd been plenty of custom then, even in Winter. Hell, even the garage had turned a profit back then - days of the Austin 1100, the Morris Minor and the Ford Pop. Petrol and service, nothing complicated. But his dad had learned his tinkering in the war, and cars weren't like that any more. You needed a PHd just to wash them these days, and the dealerships were winning out over the independents with cars getting more and more computer based.

He'd lost count of the small businesses that had once made Carrickbar worth the living, and which had now gone. The harbour had once turned it's hand to many things - but the grain mill was long gone too, as was the fishing, likewise the coal merchant who'd sent colliers out to the Isle of Man. None of it had been big - but enough to carry the youth and the old men to retirement, to make the library and the school and the bank and the little stand of shops worthwhile.

Economically speaking the place wasn't worth a damn any more but Squinty was managing, and how he managed was nobody's business.

He made rendezvous with the trawler mid morning, a scratty looking thing out of Cork, all rust and grey. Stuff went over the side with still a quarter mile of water between them. It might have been anything - junk, scraps, kitchen slops,... anything of the variety of flotsam that washed up regularly ashore - so casually was it done. Squinty readied the hook for the pickup and wound the engine up a notch. A couple of guys lounged against the rail, smoking. Neither looked his way. The trawler maintained course and speed, lurching on.

Then he passed a quiet hour fishing, still far out of sight of land, bagged a couple of whiting for his trouble. He checked the length carefully like his dad had taught him, before deciding they were keepers. Industrial trawling had all but killed the stocks, and his little ruler seemed a futile gesture towards conservation, but Squinty like to do his bit. Then he packed his gear, turned up his collar and set sail for home. His tackle box was about ten kilograms the heavier now, but not from the fishing. A year's wages were riding in it,... maybe even two.

His dad would not have approved, but options these days were few and being honest meant minimum wage slavery, and going hungry.

If all went to plan the car would be waiting at the garage, flat tyre, keys pushed through the door. It was a common enough thing - someone passing through, spot of bother with the car - certainly nothing to raise eyebrows. It would be driving away come tea time, good as new, spare tyre stuffed with Cannabis resin and a change of plates. Where it went from there was none of Squinty's business, so long as that fat envelope was on his mat, and they'd not failed him yet.

Only recently introduced to the brotherhood of the dark side, he'd discovered a strong sense of honour amongst criminals - all be it one built on fear. Not that Squinty saw himself as a criminal - he was only a part time smuggler. It was a Carrickbar tradition, the smuggling. There had been casks of French brandy once, in the olden days, Catholic Priests too at the time of Cromwell. Now it was drugs and people. Squinty wouldn't touch people of course. You never knew who they were or what their business was, and fortunately for Squinty all foreigners measured up the same: unwelcome.

Drugs were different.

People knew the risks with drugs, and had a choice, just like with tobacco and alcohol. And the smuggling of them was cash-lucrative.

Of course the trouble with cash like that was you couldn't put it in the bank without raising suspicion, so you spent a while buying cars with it at auction, higher class jobs, then driving them on to somewhere else, selling them, sometimes even for a profit, and sometimes the profit even went through the books, and he paid taxes on it.

Squinty prided himself on being a crafty old boy, looked like a vagrant, but he'd half a million in the bank which was more than could be said for anyone else in Carrickbar - poor bastards - and by the looks of things all of 'em growing leaner by the day. The secret to being a successful scoundrel, he'd discovered, was not to make too much a show of it. No gold bling, nor fancy motor cars for him, though he'd probably stand a better chance with Hermione if he smartened himself up a bit, looked more like that Finnucky guy who drank his coffee with a frilly name and drove a big black, shiny motor.

Still, he'd show her a thing or two, given half a chance. Mr. Americano my arse. No, she didn't like dirt much didn't Hermione, always wiping it away, making things sparkle. His mum had been like that, a lifetime of cleaning up, and a week after she'd gone the place was as big a shit hole as it had been when she'd moved in with the old man fifty years

ago. A wasted life in his opinion. Cleanliness never stood the test of time, you see? If it was a settled experience you wanted, dirt was a much more constant companion.

In sight of the harbour he saw her running on the beach, cupped the glasses ready for a closer squint of her. Of course it was too cold for that little bra thing she sometimes wore, and sure enough when he looked, he saw her as a shapeless lump running in an oversize hoodie. Something was wrong with the bins now though, must have dropped them, banged the prisms because he was seeing double. But then he realised there were two of them, two girls, close in side by side, keeping pace, keeping step.

That Russian slag? Maybe. She and Hermione had been getting pally lately - except he'd never seen Helena move fast. She was more the sort who floated by like a queen on skates. Scary woman, that. He remembered trying to charge her a day's labour when all he'd done was clean her spark plugs. Most punters wouldn't have known the difference and just paid up. But she'd called him a crook to his face and threatened him with "connections", threatened even to cut his balls off. Then she'd taken the car to Weston for a second opinion, came back and paid him for an hour of his time. Told him to take it or leave it.

He could have made trouble for her - never forgot a slight didn't Squinty - but he couldn't take the chance she was bluffing over those connections. The last thing he wanted was the Russians taking an interest in his patch because he'd heard all sorts of nasty stories about what Russian mobsters did to people they didn't like, or even simply people who got in their way. Not civilised, see? though for all he knew they were already running things - his only contacts in the smuggling trade being a voice on the telephone. Time, place, going rate. Yes or no.

Helena Aynslea!

Nothing like the rich for being tight wads, eh, Squinty?

But it wasn't Helena running with Hermione. It was someone else, shorter, younger, someone who didn't fit Squinty's equation of Carrickbar. He liked things quiet, liked every day the same. Strangers put him on edge as much as the cops. But you rarely saw a copper in Carrickbar - except for that business over the drowned girl which had brought them in droves. But he'd not seen them since, and that was fine.

Strangers were washing up more and more these days though, and that didn't make sense, Carrickbar being what it was, void of work, comfort or meaning. It was like they were gathering for something, like they were fleeing the hardships of the wider world and heading back to the sepia tinted seaside of their childhoods. Except they couldn't see the world was heading in one direction only and there was no point trying to fight your way back against the tide. The only pleasure these days, apart from sex, was getting off your head on something else - drugs for some, money for others.

For Squinty it was money. And the dream of Hermione.

God what he wouldn't give for an hour with her?

There wasn't enough water for coming back into harbour, so he ran the boat up on the beach, tied her off with a long line, and would settle her later. Then he came up to the promenade with his rods and his fish and his tackle box, trying not to give the impression he was humping a lot of weight. Calm as you like was Squinty, shambolling, shuffling, coming up the road. The only thing that gave him pause was the fact the car wasn't there. No matter. There'd obviously been a change of plan. They'd be in touch. In the mean time he'd have to think of somewhere safe to hide the stuff.

Then up to the Sea View Cafe for his pies.

Chapter Thirty Eight

Hermione is coming down from the flat when she hears the shop door jingle and Squinty's dulcet tones ring out: "Who the fuck are you?"

And Anica's quiet reply: "I am Anica of course. Who the fuck are you?"

It was a peculiar fact that John pretended to be a hard-case, but capitulated at the first rebuff. He either slinked away, as with Helena, or softened his tone into jest like he did with Hermione. The question remained though to what degree did she trust this judgement when it came to sex? Was it always just the thrill of his greedy eye, and no more, or was there a side to him, once loosed, that knew no control?

She pauses on the stair, listens for his reply. She knows enough about Anica now to know she needs no help in dealing with people. For a moment Squinty is stuck for words, finally manages: "Em,.. name's John. John Mulligan."

"Well then, Mr. John Mulligan. What can I get you?"

"Em,... tea,.. and a couple of pies, warmin' to take out, like. Em,.... please."

Hermione is startled by the "please". Obviously Anica's youth inhibits the full flow of his vulgarity. In a sense this is a good thing, possibly even a redeeming thing, a thing she weighs sightly in his favour, that is until she enters the café to find his eye hooked around the middle button of the girl's blouse. She may be young, but clearly Squinty does not think her too young in that respect - in the respect of being an object of desirable womanly attributes.

She feels a darkness come over her now. She would feel safe with Finn, even were she naked and blind drunk, same with Lionel. Both men would avert their eyes, cover her with a blanket and see her safe to bed. But John Mulligan? She would not like to put that to the test. She has always known this about him, chides herself for her willingness to forgive.

"'Sup then John? See you've already met Anica."
"Aye."

Anica fastens the top button of her blouse, raises her eyes in secret to Hermione, then makes busy with the tea.

Hermione tries to think the day through: a few locals for morning coffee, an increasing number of leathered bikers for lunch, quieter in the afternoons.

Squinty settles with tea at the counter, hides his eyes in it, sinks into an almost sullen silence. Something troubling him, she's thinking.

"I am from Romania," Anica tells him.

"Oh, aye? Good for you, love."

"I work with Hermione now."

"Aye?"

"Carrickbay is very nice place. I feel very,... welcome."

Squinty does not correct her, has run out of words, nods his acknowledgement, his xenophobia overcome by the paradox of his love-lust for women - so long as they're white.

Anica is trying hard.

The girl's willingness to stay on puzzled Hermione at first, but then she supposed, with everything else gone, home would be wherever her sister was, dead or alive. Sadly dead. Hermione would have done the same. The girl wants to work, is *determined* to work. Hermione has explained she cannot pay, but the girl is still willing in exchange for a roof and food. And Hermione, at first a little resentful at the loss of privacy, finds she enjoys the girl's company. The situation transmutes from slightly awkward to win-win. And it's not exactly like she needs the place as a shag-pad, is it?

The door jingles again and in comes Lionel. She hasn't seen him since Christmas and is glad to see him now, looks up to greet him with the usual sparkle, but sees at once he's troubled, and unlike with Squinty, feels it in her heart. What is it with her men this morning? He takes a seat by the window, as far out of earshot as he can manage, then raises a hopeful eyebrow in her direction. She approaches with her pad, pen clicking nervously.

"Lionel?"

He doesn't really want anything, she can see that, but he orders coffee anyway because he doesn't want to be rude.

"Seen anything of Finn?" he asks eventually. There's an urgent catch in his voice, well hidden, but again she feels it like a hook in her heart.

"Not heard nothin', Lionel. Still away I think. Not expectin' no Valentines neither."

This latter remark, she'd no idea where it had come from. Valentines indeed!

Lionel's mood shifts to one of sympathy. "Oh? Oh dear."

"What's up then? Not paid his rent or somethin'?"

"What? Oh,... no, nothing like that. Perfectly reliable fellow is Finn,... but you know that. I just wondered, that's all. Financial type, isn't he? I remember him saying."

"Suppose so. You know him better than me."

Lionel picks up on the sharks swimming around Finn's name, registers his sympathy with a little tightening of his jaw, flicks an eye out to where Squinty slouches schizophrenically torn between eavesdropping and perving Anica's chest. Subliminally Lionel urges caution.

Hermione gives him an affirmative nod. "I'll find you his number."

She regrets expressing the sourness of her relationship with Finn, or rather the lack of any relationship at all because most likely it gives the impression she wishes things were otherwise, when plainly she does not. And Lionel clearly has other worries. Then again, it might have been better to give Squinty the impression she and Finn were bosom buddies, because she's still afraid Squinty might be in love with her, or whatever Squinty passes off for love - a thing, she muses, that probably only lasts until the post coital moments of the first shag. And she'd rather not go that far in order to be rid of him.

This cycling of her thoughts around Finn confuses her, renders her a little giddy.

Squinty's pies ping, bringing her back to her senses. She watches as Anica slides them into a paper bag, dabs the till with faux expertise.

"Will be three pounds pre-cisely, please, Mr Mulligan." Squinty finds some clean coinage for a change, then slopes away with a jingle of the door to see him out. The air of the café lifts at once to the accompaniment of a brightening sun.

Hermione brings Lionel his coffee and Finn's number on a post it note. With Squinty gone, she's no longer inclined to whisper on the subject of Finn. "He's not been answering his phone," she explains "Had some sort of accident, I heard. Don't even know if he'll be comin' back, Lionel. Sorry."

"Oh, my dear!" Lionel's hand drops at once to Hermione's, a gesture that both warms her and fills her up, so she has to draw it away, but gently. She's trying to sound dismissive, like she couldn't care less if Finn were dead or alive, but Lionel is seeing through her. "Think he might be involved with Helena, actually," she tells him. "Not seen her for a while neither. Kyle says she's away. She and Finn have had words, apparently. Lovers tiff, sounds like. Wonderin' if she might have gone after him."

"Now, Hermione,... don't jump to conclusions. Finn's no fool. I mean, I like Helena immensely. Since Christmas I've seen a different side to her. I think she's very gracious. But both Finn and I,... we're too fragile a sub-species of mankind to be anything other than gentlemen towards a woman like that. She's made for other things and meant for much bolder men than either of us."

Hermione nods. None of this is anything to do with her, and she resents it that anyone should think otherwise - even though she started it.

Lionel is puzzled - his own anxieties forgotten for a moment. "But,... what sort of accident?"

"Don't know, Lionel,... last I saw of him was,.... well, you know. That night."

He nods, lowers his voice, "And the young lady?"

"Anica."

"Sister, I'm told."

Hermione nods, wonders who told him.

"Terrible thing. Anything I can do to help, let me know."

"Okay. But listen, it's me should be helping you. What is it Lionel? What's happened?"

Lionel takes a breath, thinks about it first, then says: "Financial advisor's done a bunk, that's all. Think I may be ruined, actually. Financially at least."

"But that's terrible."

"Oh,... well. My fault. Knew he was a shady bugger - pardon my French. But I could do with some advice. If Finn should turn up, will you tell him I was asking?"

"'Course I will."

"Hard to find anyone whose word you can trust where money's concerned, but I think I can trust Finn."

Hermione sighs, wonders if this is true, decides it is. Finn may have done a bunk with her trust, but he didn't lead her on, and didn't bed her first. "Suppose you're right."

"Worst case I can sell the house, move back into Elm Street. The old age pension will see me through. No more holidays in the sun, though."

"But Lionel you told me you never go on holiday."

"I know. So I'll be fine." He looks wistful for a moment. "Like to hang on to the Alvis though,... if I can."

The rumble of Motorcyles cruising up the promenade announces the approach of lunch time. Better ready the griddle then. Anica knows the drill, and is already opening the bacon, and the beans. In the little window-trough outside, Hermione notes the first speculative shoots of green from the bulbs she planted in the autumn - miniature daffodils and snowdrops. Life goes on for some, not for others. Best she can do is lend her energy when she can and while she's got any left. Better be thinking about that outdoor furniture for the summer too. She'd imagined ladies with parasols and gentlemen in blazers and Fedora hats taking tea and strawberries. Biker boys and bacon barms hardly

conjures up the same genteel image, but they're a well behaved bunch - chatty, good humoured, wholesome and welcome.

It might work.

"You'll stay for lunch, Lionel? Big fry up. On the house. I mean,... seeing as now you're broke. I mean,... sorry,... don't mean to make light of it."

"Oh,... well. That's very kind. I shall. Much appreciated. And sometimes the best one can do is make light of things. Too much heaviness and despair, otherwise, Hermione. Eh?"

"Quite right, Lionel."

Hermione catches Anica's expression. The girl is open with her feelings, also her opinions, but there's no harm in her. Right now she's wondering what kind of business Hermione is running when she gives meals away. But the Sea View is more than a business to Hermione. Indeed its revival is a pair of Agincourt fingers wagged at the regular way of things, the way that has ruined the world, murdered Anica's sister, tried to ruin Hermione, same as it tried to ruin Finn, and now Lionel. She manages a smile, a little wistful - seems everyone she knows in Carrickbar is a refugee of some sort, including her.

All them coming for refuge.

Even Squinty.

Chapter Thirty Nine

Finn's return to Carrickbar coincided also with the arrival of rather a tired looking Favre Leuba Seamaster wristwatch, circa 1967. Its coming helped him forget his tiredness. It had been a long journey, six hours, and now he was back he could not contemplate a return to Aylesbury for a very long time. Indeed the thought of ever facing the road again made him feel ill. He would be several days at least, resting, he thought, regaining his wits.

The house felt fresh, cool, open, welcoming, and more importantly, he was not expecting Kathleen to walk in at any moment to discover him on the sofa with Helena all smooth and silky, and him with an embarrassing erection.

How weird was that?

Yes, yes,...

He had to deal with Kathleen,

Deal with the whole mess of his former life, at some point,

Helena too.

But not yet.

He picked up the little package and took it straight to his desk, snapped the light on and examined the potential of this forgotten project. The Favre Leuba Seamaster was a small watch for a man - more appropriate for a lady these days. Many seemed to suffer from flaking dials in older age - most of the shiner examples on Ebay being repaints. Dial work was a rare skill, but pointless on a watch that would barely make twenty quid at auction. Sure enough the dial was a repaint, and done without much skill at all. But the mechanism was sound - dual springs, miraculously intricate, and reassuringly lusty when wound and held to his ear.

Wait,...

Finn caught himself.

There were a million things running round in his head, his cheek still wet from Helena's parting kiss, for one thing, at least in his

imagination. And there was the avalanche that had swept him off his feet since the drowning of the girl. And here he was, shelving it all, feeling himself coming up for air, looking at the bubbling imperfections in the dial of an old watch.

So let it be, Finn,... just go with it, mate.

Finn already had a Favre Leuba, one with a busted mechanism but a pristine case and dial, again circa '67, so the two would make the perfect hybrid. He brewed tea and settled down, handling his tools like grasping the hands of old friends. Then he reduced the watch to bits.

Finally, he drew breath, caught himself in the act of something mysterious.

The light, the scent of the room, the feel of it, all were welcoming. It was not the big things in life that were the most important. It was small things, feelings of joy, of comfort, of satisfaction, and they were as easily found at the edge of the known world, as in the thick of it.

Helena.

A woman with a bullet in her back.

He had been with her for several days now, felt easier in her company. And she had talked much by way of good sense. He was no longer afraid of her.

The number of people who had died in Georgia between 1992 and 2008, was in dispute, but probably somewhere around thirty thousand, and she had very nearly been one of them. Two hundred thousand were internally displaced by the conflict. Helena had been a refugee in her own country.

The times were not at all modern. The upheavals, the atrocities, the tragedies were on the scale of anything that Europe's medieval henchmen might have come up with. His own country had seemed mad at times and seemingly forever sliding into decline, yet it remained at least,... peaceful.

For now.

There was a paranoia, true, a constant mad wailing on the Internet, an expression of beliefs in all sorts of mad things, if only to relieve the

boredom. But there was a darkness too, racism, misogyny – men ranting against the foreigner, against women, the poor reduced day by day to the status of slaves, of non entities. The enlightenment of past decades was being erased by an incoming tide of ignorance and conspicuous avarice.

Helena had reinvented herself by necessity of having literally lost everything else. Her coming to England, her matrimonially acquired Britishness, all were unexpected twists of fate, and she seemed to harbour no sentiment for her vanished homeland, other than an occasional proud bristling when others mistook her for a Russian. And after all of that she'd washed up at the edge of the sea, like him, like Hermione, in Carrickbar.

A waste of life?

Or was it a second chance at building something worthwhile? He thought sometimes, it was like this old Favre Leuba, you could no longer make an adequate whole with the original parts. You had to make good what you had left, the bits that weren't so time-worn, then cast around for the bits you were missing.

"So Finn, you will settle with Kathleen?"

They'd been heading north, through the industrial West Midlands, Finn and Helena, the traffic crawling nose to tail along the M5, and the world beyond the windscreen was uniformly dirty and superficial, billboards the size of multi-storey carparks screaming their wares in a gaudy fluorescence.

"Settle?"

"You will divorce?"

Finn had not thought this far ahead, and the question troubled him, and it troubled him because he did not want to be alone, yet was it not the necessity of being alone that had brought him this far? "I guess we will, eventually. But at some point before then I suppose we'll have to simply,... talk to one another."

"Why? My husband and I,... we do not talk. But he knows where I am. He wants to move on, he will talk to me. So you must let Kathleen know,... where you are. For myself I do not recommend marriage any more, so this does not matter. For you neither. The world is so upset,

Finn, marriage I have identified as being the same as any other possession we are bound to lose, and suffer when we value it too much. Better to let it go, to let everything go, hold more to the basics of love. And sex of course. Depending on what moves you at the time. And what is permitted."

"Em,..."

"You are missing your boys?"

Yes, he missed them. They'd seemed for years nothing but dope smoking wastrels, arrogant and self centred, taking pleasure in Finn's own humiliation. But they were his kids, and therefore never beyond hope of redemption. And now they were doing something, working somewhere. Had he misjudged them? Should he, after all of that, actually be proud of them?

"Helena, can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Kyle's father?"

She became guarded. "What about him?"

"He doesn't miss Kyle? Doesn't want him,... around?"

"No, but then it is easier for a man to dismiss his children. A woman cannot."

"It does seem a bit perverse."

"Oh?"

"I'm talking about me now. When I was at home with them they just aggravated me. Drained me. And my dream was to come home one night and find they'd moved out - found jobs or women or both, anything that would give me back a bit of space, and peace, you know? But now?"

"Now you are curious. You want to know what they are doing. If they are making good after all? You are decent man, Finn. Kyle's father could not care less. Kyle has,... not the potential he wishes for."

"I'm sorry. I'll,... keep my ears open. We'll find something for him,... I mean,... for Kyle."

She warmed visibly, eyes moistening. "I know you mean that. And thank you. But there is nothing for Kyle where he's at, and to go where it's at will make him ill. As for you Finn, your boys will come round when they are ready or when they need money. But for now it is wise you distance yourself. You have done the right thing, though I know you think you have not."

"I'd not taken you for a philosopher, Helena."

"All former Soviets are philosophers, Finn. Or alcoholics. Or both. Is only way to stay sane with history as turbulent as ours."

"I used to be afraid of atom bombs - as a kid, I mean. Russian bombs. You know?"

"Ah, yes. That. I apologise on behalf of Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, for cold war between us. However, as Soviet citizen in those days, I am equally afraid of you Western Imperialist bastards."

"Then I also apologise. Didn't think the world could get any worse than that. Now look at it?"

"Pftt. Is not so bad now. I live day to day, Finn. You must do the same. Value the moment for what it is. For now I am with you, and very pleased with myself. Tomorrow, who knows? But rest easy, it will be a long time before we see guns and long knives on the streets of Carrickbar."

"I suppose you're right."

"Of course I'm right. It has this to recommend it at least. Otherwise yes, it is a dull grey place and fucking freezing in Winter. You will meet with Hermione now?"

"Hermione?"

"You will make whatever feeble excuses you can for your stupidity. And next time she asks, you will go to her bed?"

"What? No,... absolutely not. I mean,... I'll apologise for not calling, yes, of course. But bed, no. Or anything else for that matter."

"I told you Finn, this woman, she wants you. She it *hot* for you."

"I'm not sure I believe any of that. And anyway, don't I get a say? Listen, Helena, I don't know how well you know Hermione, but she's had it tough in her own way and the last thing she needs is just one more useless guy taking the wind out of her sails."

"The wind out of her?.... what does this mean please? I am unfamiliar with this saying."

"Never mind. Look, you know about me now. You know everything about me."

She rolls her eyes. "Not everything... obviously."

"I'm trying to be serious. It wouldn't be fair to Hermione. She needs a guy with less,... complications, fewer,... needs."

"Finn,... Finn. We are grown ups. We all have complications. Needs? What is this mean, other than good fucking? We are all screwed up. Listen, when they are shooting at us, it is okay to run, run to wherever there are no guns, no long knives. It is no shame to make new life, to stick fingers up and say fuck you. Go with Hermione next time she wants you. Why be so serious all the time? Live. Make love. Be happy. It's just a fuck."

"Helena, with me,... it's never going to be just a,..." The word fuck was already over-used so Finn avoided it, but hoped she knew what he meant. "I need to heal first. Or,.."

"Heal? Fuck heal. Ask me, you spend too much time with shrink woman. Need place to heal first, or there is no healing. Cannot heal in cold and rain. Only fester wound. For ever. And best place to heal from lover's wound is bed of new lover. Trust me on this. It is magical place. You English! Why is everything like stuck up Victorian novel to you? Like Jane Fucking Austen?"

He loved the way she spoke, the penetrating insights aided somehow by her clipped and often jangled English, and of course the frequent hammered nails of the 'F' word. But then he read something else in her, experienced his own flash of insight - something in her eyes, in her face, in her past stories and it drew him up sharp, because he should have realised it before. "Helena?"

"Oh? You look serious now. You shout at me for rudeness. And excessive use of word Fuck. I apologise. Please concentrate on road."

But they were crawling at two miles an hour in solid traffic, not much to concentrate on. "Listen,... there's something about you, something that only makes sense if,..."

"Nothing about me makes sense of me, Finn. I am more fucked up than you are. Apologies again for excessive use of word fuck. There, I erase it from my vocabulary. I try harder."

She was dissembling. Finn ignored her, pressed on. "What you told me yesterday, about Georgia, about home, when you ran, about when you got shot."

"So?"

"Did you,... leave anyone behind?"

She thought for a moment. She had never deliberately hidden anything of her past, but few people enquired, and fewer managed to work it out for themselves. "I told you this. I leave everything. Everyone."

"But you said anyone left behind?..."

"I have only Kyle now," she said, then pulled the shutters down with a clang. "Please stop at next service station. I need toilet and fancy lifestyle magazine. This conversation bores me. Thankfully we are not lovers, because already you drive me mad."

"Okay, sorry. Next services, no problem."

Helena's entire family had been murdered. Finn felt ashamed. He'd not even managed to hold down a job. His job, his marriage, it had broken him, made him ill. How about losing your entire family to violence? What would that do to you?

"Really, I'm sorry Helena. Didn't mean to,..."

"Oh, for fu,... heaven's sake! Don't be sorry to me, Finn. I am mean-hearted bitch. Fight back, or I will tear you to pieces."

"I don't fight back. I don't fight full stop."

"I know. You are gentleman. But trust me – you can fight with me. You will not hurt me, and I will respect you for it."

"Okay. I'll try."

Helena doubted it, smiled, shook her head, ventured her hand to stroke his cheek. "Okay, listen, I say this one time: I am working in another town, the day it happened. So, I try to return, but warring has already overtaken my home,.. though warring is too rich a word for it. This is more craziness with guns. I am unlucky in this sense, but I am still alive. Thank you for your kindness, Finn. I know you mean well."

So,...

Midnight now, and Finn set the watch down. Gold plated case, only the lightest wear, black dial, pristine, new glass. The fingers had been a problem, being too damaged to make good, so he'd rummaged in his bit box for a set that looked about right. A pair from an old Timex did the trick. It was something of a hybrid then, but a good looker and a strong ticker. If it was within ten seconds in the morning, he'd call it a success.

Sure, he'd been a dick, and hoped it wasn't too late to smooth things over with Hermione. But if he gave her the watch, like he half-way intended, that was more than smoothing things over. That was a statement, and he'd better mean it. The trouble was, even though he told himself he was in love with her, he wasn't sure he meant it. He wasn't sure if he willingly chose to love her, or if he acted out of sentiment.

Carina would have told him sentiment was of no use. Helena would have told him to stop thinking about it and make love anyway, sentiment or not. He wrapped the watch in a square of felt and laid it safe among his tin of keepers. Like anything else in life, you can think about it all you want, but you go with your gut in the end.

And deal with the consequences later.

Chapter Forty

Six thirty am, light drizzle, cold. Hermione jogs up the steps by the harbour, Anica always a few steps ahead, her pace a little faster than Hermione is comfortable keeping up with. This is the downside to living with a teenager, she's thinking, this feeling of creeping age. There's a plain blue van parked on the car park, and it's been there all night by look of it. She's not seen it before, thinks she catches the sound of movement from inside.

Someone camping in it?

God help them in this weather!

Eight a.m. and Anica is showered, baking cakes in the oven of the kitchenette. Yesterday's cup cakes had not tickled the fancy of anyone, and Anica had been disappointed. Hermione suggested they were not the sort of thing to attract a man, that a man would want a more substantial fancy, and most of her customers now, strangely, were men, rich biker men with hands frozen from riding a hundred miles for the fun of it because their bullshit lives and their bullshit jobs were otherwise unchallenging.

So, this morning Anica has gone for a variety of fruit-loaf and tea-bread, recipes passed on by her grandmother. Hermione isn't sure of the economics of this. The ingredients are expensive, but the girl wants to make a difference, and Hermione has not the heart to pour cold water - unlike her mother who would have poured it a plenty. And Hermione did not want to be like her mother.

Mother?

Of course she had already worked out Anica was as old as her child would have been, had she not lost it.

Nine a.m. and the sign is turned from closed to open. Anica sweeps, dusts the windowsills, catches up a stray piece of lettuce they missed from the cleanup last night. Hermione sits behind the counter, flicks on the pad, taps up the morning's news. The economy is not crashing as quickly as the BREXIT remainers had claimed, but more cuts are needed to keep things moving in the right direction - which seems always backwards.

And we are all in it together.

A strong and stable economy.

But everyone knows the economy is screwed, that there is no recovery, no stability, that something has gone terribly wrong.

"Dickheads."

Anica looks up from her broom. "You say something, Minnie?"

"'Nothing, darlin'. You okay?"

Anica is not okay. Her heart is broken, and she is homesick for a home that no longer exists. Her sister is dead, her mother and father are dead. She smiles, blinks slow, nods.

"Sorry, stupid question."
"I am happy to be here with you, Minnie."

"And I'm happy you came. Otherwise I'd have to sweep up all day myself."

"Hmm. You are funny."

"Oh, that's me. Laugh a minute."

They exchange spirited looks. Hermione enjoys the youthful energy. Anica is not shattered by her ordeal. Just angry. She teases: "Maybe your Mr Finn will come today. I am interested to meet him. Is he very handsome?"

"You can go off people, you know."

Anica pokes out her tongue. "But you will not be saying this when my cakes are bringing you a profit."

"No argument there."

A grey saloon pulls up, ignores the yellow lines and parks half on the pavement. The door jingles and two guys walk in, one lean, one stocky, both of them looking like they've been chiselled from stone. No expression. One has a badge around his neck that identifies him as a copper. He hides it in the top pocket of his shirt, but it seems clumsily done, staged, as if he wants it known he is a copper, pretending not to be a copper. They order coffees and sit down. Their tone is brusque.

Manners are not their forte.

Hermione watches them for a while, then types on her pad: "Cops?" She shows it to Anica who types underneath: "So?"

"So, I dunno."

The cops in Weston had not been overly sympathetic with the identification of Anica's sister. Indeed they had been brutally matter of fact. There had followed some scrutiny of Anica's identity, and much waiting on bum shuffling hard plastic chairs, but they had been left with the impression everything was in order, at least so far as Anica's existence in the United Kingdom was concerned.

Immigration was not the problem.

There would be a formal inquest at some point, but there was no reason to suspect anything other than death by misadventure, however that misadventure had taken place. The girl had drowned. So what? The cockle gangs had already been questioned, which was news to Hermione, but no one had admitted to knowing, or ever seeing Anica's sister before.

Well they wouldn't would they.

End of story.

Except now there were a couple of cops sitting in the cafe, pretending not to be cops.

Anica types: "Why u thinks thr cops?"

"Saw badge. Plus smell like cops."

Anica sniffs the air. Shrugs, shakes her head. "Problem me working here? They checking up?"

"U not claiming benefit, and no problem u working anyway since still in EU. And cops don't chase benefit tourists."

"I should go upstairs maybe? Hide?"

"Too late. Seen u. Obviously. Duh!"

Eleven o'clock and Squinty is shuffling up the hill for his pies. He looks dispirited, a weight on his shoulders this morning. What's up with him these days?

Hermione is tempted to undo her blouse a button in order to perk him up.

The cops are still there and seem to find his progress, slow and slightly wheezy, funny enough for a sarcastic chortle. Hermione finds herself annoyed by this, feeling inexplicably protective towards Squinty. The door jingles as he enters. Hermione is glad for the distraction, so glad, Squinty is at once suspicious.

"Morning John, darlin'. Pies is it? And tea?"

"Em,.... aye." Squinty sits, basking in Hermione's unexpected warmth.

"Cold mornin'. You look like you're blowin'. Everythin' okay, John?"

"Bit chesty," he says, casts a wary eye towards the strangers.

"How 'bout I tempt you with a slice of Anica's tea bread? Or maybe some of this fruitcake? Home made, find none better. Special Romanian recipe handed down from generation to generation."

"Romanian, eh? I dunno. How much?"

"Pound a slice?"

Squinty draws breath, sucks his teeth, but is clearly tempted. "Fresh is it? Smells delicious. Go on then. Slice of tea bread."

"Butter with that?"

Squinty nods, his eyes drawn suddenly, not by her tits but the Pad. She hits the home button, hides her conversation with Anica.

"So," says Squinty, addressing Anica. "How you settling in then, lass?"

Anica beams, says she is settling in very well, that everyone is very kind. Hermione, begs to differ, remembering the brusque manner of the mortuary technician who had rather given the impression Anica's sister's body was taking up valuable space, and the sooner it was got rid of the better.

"Aye well, that's grand. We all stick together round here, eh Minnie, love?"

Is this the first time Squinty has called her by her name? He seems mellow, but still shifty. She wonders if he smells cops as well.

"Busy then, John?"

"Nah, not much. You?"

"Pickin up lately. All them biker chaps."

Squinty growls his disapproval.

"Nice chaps. Bikers 'aint what they were. High rollers most of 'em now. Any idea what some of them bikes is worth? If your petrol wasn't so dear you might make a bit of money off them yourself."

"No money in petrol," he grumbles. "Never was. ‘Bin wonderin’ about going into the second hand car business though."

Hermione smiles, wonders who in their right mind would buy a used car from Squinty. No one who knew him, that's for sure.

The cops have made their coffee last an hour. Time to get them to pay up for another, or move on. But dare she? Of course she dare. Bastards!

"Get you anything else, gents?"

"Nope." Again the tone is brusque, dismissive. She is cold shouldered. Hermione is not used to such abruptness. She may not be the most beautiful woman in Carrickbar, but allows herself to feel she can bring out the charm in most men. But their tone implies: "Fuck off."

She withdraws, chastened, reminded of her night in the cells and the moment she realised she was bleeding.

Her legs are suddenly weak.

Squinty picks up on it, swings round on his stool. "Oy! Twat. More manners."

The cops stare as one at Squinty. Squinty slides from his stool, stands tall and glares back. Hermione holds her breath. Is this to be the first bar-room brawl at the Sea View? The cops get up and leave, slowly. There is no apology. Squinty waits until the door is not quite closed, calls after them: "Wankers."

They drive away slowly, perhaps to show they are not intimidated. Hermione realises she was wrong: Squinty didn't know.

"They were cops, John."

"What?" Squinty's brows meet in the middle. "Why didn't you say?"

"Thought you knew. Thought you'd smelled them, same as me."

"Smelled ‘em? What they smell like?"

"You know,... sour, like. One of ‘em ad a badge."

Squinty nods slowly, thoughtfully. The pieces coming together. Cops on the scent? "No matter. I ain't scared of them, bastards."

"Think they were maybe snooping on Anica."

"No reason for 'em to do that is there?"

Anica shakes her head.

Hermione is still trembling. "But what else would cops be doing 'round here?"

"Passing through," he says.

But no one passes through Carrickbar. Anyone coming here means to come for something - the view, the air, a bit of fishing, sanctuary, but there's always something, and so far as cops are concerned that something is the collar of someone with something to hide.

Squinty's pies ding. He pays in silence, shuffles back to the garage.

"He's only taken one bite out of his cake?" says Anica.

"Only drunk half his tea as well. And nothing wrong with neither."

"Either."

"What?"

"Nothing wrong with 'either'. Really, Minnie your English is worse than mine, and I am not English."

Chapter Forty One

Finn was disturbed around nine by a rapping on his door. He was tired after the long run North, and his late night with the watch. He'd been hoping for a bit of a lie in, and a continuation of his quiet thinking time, which had thus far got him nowhere. There was no way he could drive back south today. He'd give it a week, then see how he felt.

Always the wait to see how he felt.

Wondering if it was the postman and some forgotten parcel, he put on a dressing gown and opened the door.

"Lionel!"

"Ah, Finn old boy. Sorry to wake. Glad to see you're back. Heard you'd had an accident. Good Lord. Whatever happened?"

"Long story. Not even you could have made it up. Come in. Make us some coffee, and I'll get dressed."

Lionel took the long way round, filling Finn in on events at Carrickbar, such as they were - new girl at the cafe, Anica, the dead girl's sister, Hermione taking her in, taken her to her heart. Terrible business and all that, but things were looking a bit brighter for Hermione now, lots of gentlemen bikers, as she called them, rolling up for breakfasts and lunches. Takings must be up.

And finally, after an awkward silence, and stirring his coffee for distraction, Lionel mentioned his difficulties with the Financial Adviser,...

"I don't suppose you'd be able to,... run your eyes over my affairs would you?"

By lunch time Finn was paper deep in Lionel's study. The man's affairs were tidy. It was just that his financial adviser wasn't answering the telephone.

"I mean, office boarded up and the bugger flown, Finn."

"Well, that's obviously a concern, Lionel. But so far as I can see he invested your money in a broad portfolio of legitimate holdings, and it's all still there. You're drawing a monthly income, and should still get the

next payment."

"So, I'm not ruined then?"

"Hardly. You've been very prudent. We can ask around, try and find out what happened to your guy, but probably the best thing is to forget about him and get yourself another adviser."

"Won't have to sell the house then?"

Lionel obviously didn't bother with the statements that came through the door, relied instead on face to face chats with his elusive adviser. It troubled Finn so many people did the same, troubled him the world was building itself upon a squishy foundation of financial doublespeak that even he didn't understand. It was as if the financial world was bent on locking out the very people it relied upon for its money.

The guy had four hundred thousand stashed in bonds and equities. Bonds were flat just then, and equities a bit of a roller coaster, but over the long term, he was making a decent return, creaming a bit off to supplement his teacher's pension. But so long as the bank transfer went through each month, he hadn't a clue about any of it.

"Thank you Finn. That's such a relief. I can't tell you how grateful I am."

"It was nothing Lionel. Like I said, everything's fine."

"I should really take more notice of these things. Hopeless with financial affairs. My good lady took care of all that. Let me buy you lunch."

"That's really not necessary."

"Oh,... but I insist. Least I can do. At the Sea View. Hermione's been asking about you. She'll be delighted to see you're back."
"Em,... how about the King James? What's it like in there? Always wondered about it."

"What? An appalling den of iniquity, frequented only by ne-er-do-wells and ladies of easy virtue - or so I'm told. It's all filthy beer, sticky carpets and a suspicious lack of any visible hygiene certification."

"Okay,... I agree that doesn't sound great. Out of town then, and my treat?"

"Finn, you're not avoiding the Sea View are you?"

"No, Lionel, of course not. I mean, yes, Lionel. I think I am."

"Then it's true, what she said."

"What who said? And what did she say?"

"Hermione. She thinks you and Helena,... are an item. It's none of my business, but Hermione's a good friend and I think you should let her know if that's the case."

"That me and Helena are an 'item'? Does that rather quaint old phrase still mean what it used to mean, Lionel?"

"Far as I know, old boy. That you're seeing each other, you know? Stepping out, so to speak. So you're not?" Lionel was relieved. "I told her so. I said you weren't."

"Is this what village life is like? Everything taken out of context? Everything misunderstood, and the slightest word blown up out of all proportion? All of the time."

"Oh, I'm afraid it is, Finn. Yes, that's exactly what it's like. Though technically, Carrickbar's a town. Great fun isn't it? So,... you're not?"

"Not what?"

"Stepping out with Helena Aynslea."

"Lionel, I'm not cut out for romance any more. I'm not pursuing Helena, or Hermione for that matter, or anyone, and the reason is much simpler than anyone thinks."

"No,... not really. You're a decent man, and of course you're married."

Married. Well, that used to be the case, but things had changed a bit since he'd been away.

"Actually, I'm a sorry excuse for a man, Lionel. My wife has run off with her boss, and I've no idea where my kids are. I reckon that makes me a bit of a plank, to be honest."

This news did not seem to bother Lionel - indeed quite the opposite. His eyes lit up. "Then,... surely you can move on? I mean,... I'm terribly sorry to hear all of that. But,..."

"You wouldn't be thinking I could do any of that moving on with Hermione, would you?"

"Well,... you could do a lot worse,..."

"Has she said anything, or are you acting matchmaker in a purely freelance capacity?"

"Oh, Hermione's said nothing, I assure you. She was expressing,... em,.. concern that's all,... em that we'd had no word from you. But,.. well I suppose I am match-making, as you put it. I'm an old man, Finn, and we old people like to see the young ones settled. I'm also a spectacularly unsuccessful romantic novelist who can't help pairing my characters off and ensuring a happy ending."

"Okay, so put your romantic novelist's head on and think about this: Hermione is pulling herself clear of a bad beginning. Me? I don't know where to start. But it doesn't start with my pulling Hermione back down to my level. The last thing she needs right now is a guy - especially one with as much messed up baggage as me."

"Oh but you're wrong, Finn. I don't just write trite romances, you know? I like a bit of literary complication too. But neither must we overcomplicate things. Of course she needs a man. She's a woman isn't she? Now that man might be you, or it might end up being someone else - one of these regular biker chaps of hers, perhaps, or even that Squinty fellow who seems rather taken with her - though I rather hope not, odious fellow that he is.

"And we all have baggage, old chap. Usually the first time round in love we're most of us children - i.e. no baggage. Second time we're adults, loaded up to our eyeballs, and that's no time to be approaching things with the mindset of a child. No offence, Finn."

Finn wasn't offended, but he was growing irritated. "Hermione can't swim clear of this with everyone hanging onto her," he said.

"Again, I think you're wrong. You underestimate her. People are drowning here left right and centre, to borrow a rather unfortunate metaphor given recent sad events, but Hermione is a strong swimmer,

and more than that, she's a natural life-saver. She a live-giver. She just can't help herself. Think symbolically, man. Is it any wonder she was attracted to running a cafe, serving nourishment, refreshment to weary travellers? You've only to be near her to feel that nurturing spirit. Well, haven't you felt it?"

Finn agreed he'd felt it.

Then he made a rare decision.

"I'll pass on lunch, Lionel, if you don't mind. But I will go to the Sea View. I promise. I've also promised Helena, I'd go. Helena also seems hell bent on getting me and Hermione together."

"She does? Good lord, that's rather a turn up."

"I do need to speak to Hermione, and I'd rather do the speaking for myself."

"All right. Good man. As for my financial affairs, thanks again. Anything you need, any time, just ask."

Lionel had driven Finn up to the house, but Finn opted to walk back, so they shook hands in parting at the door. He wanted air and time to think.

Think, think, think,... Finn.

The Alvis sat out on the driveway, a low, pale, February sun grazing off the polished paintwork. The sea was a silty blue, flat calm. A lone fishing boat carved a foamy line due west. It was a mild day, a quiet day, Carrickbar hidden below a line of hills, just a few chimneys showing, wood-smokey smudges rising vertically into a hazy sky. Lionel watched him.

Finn turned, one last wave in parting.

"It has something doesn't it?" said Lionel.

Finn agreed. Yes, it had something. "Is that option to buy the place in Elm Street still open?"

Lionel nodded. "Interested?"

"Thinking about it."

Finn turned then and walked home. There was a path through meadows which he decided to take, rather than merely follow the road. He found it at once heavy going underfoot after long rains. He slithered a little in the mud, but kept going, glad for the air and the quiet.

What was that about then?

The house in Elm Street.

If nothing else, Finn's professional training had enabled him to garner a tidy and widespread investment portfolio, some in joint names, some in Kathleen's, some in his. He could buy the house, if only as an investment. Transfer the cash out tonight. Kathleen could not object - even if they'd split up. It was an investment, and he's always managed the investments. And this would be an investment he just happened to be living in for a while.

Renting made no sense. Renting was dead money. Renting was what labour-slaves did in any top heavy society that was about to collapse back in on itself. He could still go home to Aylesbury, become an absentee landlord, jump on the bandwagon of the new feudal ruling class - those with property, leeching off those without.

Why wasn't he angry about Kathleen?

Unexpected tangent, Finn, but worth sticking with.

Richard wasn't right for her - he knew that. And Kathleen also knew that. Richard had already served his purpose, got her back onto the corporate ladder, and well up it for good measure; then he'd rescued her children from a life of pot noodle and computer games. He couldn't guess what her plans were for the future, apart from more of everything, while Finn was content now to consider less, far less, in exchange for what?

Peace of mind?

Hermione thought he and Helena were an item? Did that bother her? Lionel hadn't said. Only hinted that it might. Was Hermione then actually in love with him?

And was Finn really in love with Hermione? Or was he just making it

up out of loneliness?

Analysis please?

Finn didn't want her to think he was with Helena. And as he slithered his way home across the meadow, he felt a growing urgency to see her and put her straight on the matter. He didn't want her to think he was with *anyone*, but that implied he wanted her to think he preferred to make an item with her, or rather a mistress out of her, instead of Helena - because that's what a mistress is, when a woman is consort to a married man.

Except you're not married, are you?

Not any more.

You want her for a lover then. But do you 'love' her?

It was good news her business was picking up - handsome biker chaps roaring in for coffee and lunches. But he did not like to think of her calling them darlin'. He wanted her to wait for him, even if he was never free. Even if he chose, in the end to go back to his wife. Were all men so devious and self centred? He'd thought himself a thoroughly modern man, but it was looking like he was as big a misogynist as the pervy Squinty. Even though he couldn't have her, he wanted Hermione.

Except he didn't really want her, did he?

He only thought he did.

At the end of the meadow-path was a ladder-stile bridging a drystone wall. He sat down on the top of it and looked out to sea, still thinking. How could a man not want something, yet want it at the same time?

Easy Finn, when he was afraid of it.

Chapter Forty Two

Of course it bothered Squinty there were cops in Carrickbar, sipping cappuccinos in full view of a place they suspected he was hiding a hundred grand's worth of cannabis resin, and still no word about why the onward courier hadn't turned up for it. And there was that van on the car park by the harbour wall - not from round here, and no word up at the King's Head whose it was either. It had a good view of the garage, that's all he knew, and there was something funny about it.

Sure, it was easy enough to work out what was going on here.

The problem was he couldn't free himself of the stuff, always supposing he could smuggle it out, maybe back out to sea and dump it over the side. Because then, like as not, the 'phone would ring and there'd be a new rendezvous and Squinty suddenly without the goods. And these were not the sort of people who would take that lightly. In short, he would owe them the value of the goods, and owing people like that meant getting in deeper than he wanted. Maybe next time he'd have no choice in what he brought in. Next time it might be people, might be guns. Rumour was a lot of guns were coming into England now. They tended to follow the drugs.

So, he'd be sitting on it. Tight. One thing was for sure though, he'd be doing no more runs. The presence of coppers in the village was excuse enough for him to lay low, maybe even retire. What was the penalty for handling narcotics, he wondered? A hefty prison sentence for sure. The thought of it sent a chill. But it was a chill warmed of a sudden by the sight of Hermione and Anica jogging up the promenade. Both nice clean girls, he thought. Nice clean pussies - and tight, unlike Maureen's which had a girth he swore could swallow a grapefruit, and him with it one of these nights.

And none too clean if his itchy nether parts were anything to go by.

"Dose of Thrush, Mr Mulligan," the doc had said.

Difficult to say which of those girls had the better arse. Obviously they were both asking for it, wearing spray on pants like that, cheeks wobbling provocatively. Anica was wearing an orange top he rather liked the look of given there wasn't much of it and he looked forward to summer when they'd no doubt be showing even more flesh. Hermione had the bigger chest on her, Anica being somewhat childishly underdeveloped, and he liked a bit of chest on a woman. It was hard to

choose between them, Anica obviously on account of her greater freshness, though of the two it was Hermione he had the better chance of scoring with on account of her age being nearer to his.

How old? No more than forty, he'd say. And well looked after, for sure.

'A clean woman. Soft to touch, and fragrant.'

'One day, Squinty.'

In the mean time he fantasised, fantasised about it most nights, preferred it on those occasions when Hermione wasn't willing and had to be tied and forced like in the porno-flicks he subscribed to online. Of course now there were two of them it added all sorts of saucy options, like getting them to do each other first, and then both of them doing him.

The thought of it was enough to make a man go weak.

The postman brought him a wad of mail. Uppermost was his insurance renewal on the Landrover. £700 the bastards wanted this time, and him pushing sixty with a clean license and full no claims. The annoying thing was he'd get that down to £200 at a stroke simply by going online and switching insurer. What was it with the world these days? Everyone was out looking to scam everyone else, even the institutions we were supposed to trust.

Next was a printed note in a small brown envelope. "sit tite. sit on guds. bee in tuch. burn note."

Sure. He'd already worked that one out.

Pillocks.

He burned the note at once. It felt dangerous, devious, satisfying. The cops were all over, and him cool as a cucumber. Sure, he deserved a bit of respect.

So, what now? Look normal for the cops. There was nothing for him to repair. He could take the boat out in the morning for a spot of fishing or even just sail her about. A bit of shooting the day after? Normal. Everything normal. And sit tight on the goods.

He caught sight of his reflection in the office window. Overalls, tee

shirt, hair overlong yet balding at the same time, silver sheen of stubble.

Not much of a looker are you, Squinty?

But all he needed was a bit of a clean up, maybe a run to Lancaster for fresh togs - it wasn't like he couldn't afford it. No point in sitting on a fortune unspent if there was a chance he might be going to prison soon and, for the same reason, no point in merely fantasizing over the feel of Hermione's arse underneath him and the slippery tightness of it when he might just as easily,....

What was he saying here? Simple: it was about time he did something about it. Nothing ventured, eh Squinty? And she'd been very friendly in the cafe last time. Could be she just needed a bit of persuading in the right direction and she'd be squealing for more!

Chapter Forty Three

That he was afraid of the Sea View told Finn much about the direction in which his future lay - or at least the solution to his anxieties. That's what he imagined Carina would have said, that he was resisting something, saying no to something, when what he should have been saying was *yes*.

But yes to what, Finn?

It was after lunch when he called. There was a line of bikes outside the cafe and he knew already it was a mistake. It had always been such a quiet place - he'd imagined himself sitting down with Hermione and having a quiet tete-a-tete. But how was that possible with a load of hairy bikers sitting within earshot? He could leave it until later of course, call round the flat after closing time - he knew her well enough now not to feel like he was intruding - but the thought of that frightened him all the more.

He just wanted to smooth things over, say sorry for not being in touch. Maybe this was the best way then, a cafe full of strangers. It would prevent him diving in too deep, maybe saying things he didn't mean. Inside he was struck by the unfamiliar throb of conversation - the bikers in the window and a few elderly couples from the village. It was all too busy and animated for intimacy.

When he saw Anica behind the counter he froze, felt the colour run out of him.

Lionel had already told him she was the dead girl's sister, but not that she was her twin. Anica smiled at first to see him, made a loan of Hermione's trademark greeting and gave him a chirpy: "So,... what can I get you darlin?" And when Finn didn't speak, just stood there, looking like he'd seen a ghost she made the connection and said: "You are Mr Finn?"

Finn nodded.

"I am Anica."

She came around the counter, alarmed him by her direct line into his body space, alarmed him even more when she hugged him. Did he flinch? He tried not to flinch. When was the last time anyone had come that close? Carina? Only Carina made the effort these days. He didn't

know what to do. Were people looking? Surely all eyes must be on them? He patted her shoulders gently, while her arms encircled him, held him firm, tight. She felt so light, so girlish, so exquisitely delicate.

She felt his awkwardness, blushed at her forwardness, guided him to a table, sat him down, sat down with him.

"I you bring coffee, Mr Finn?"

"Em,... it's just Finn. Finn Finucane. Thank you."

"No worries, Mr Finn Finucane. Hermione is at the bank with cash. She will return in a few minutes. She will be glad to see you, I think."

"Anica,... I'm sorry,... you look,.. just like,.."

"I know. It was often said how much we were alike, my sister and I."

"Twins surely?"

"No, we are years apart. I mean we 'were' years apart. Now, of course, she will never grow old."

Finn was trembling - trembling at the sight of her, trembling at the memory of her artless embrace. How could he mean anything to this girl when they'd not met before? What was it with Carrickbar? Set foot in the place even once and strangers were already claiming you as their kin.

He glanced at the biker crowd who had taken over what he'd come to think of as his window. There were four men, variously leathered, chatting quietly now. The nearest wore a Patek Phillpe wristwatch. This surprised Finn. It was an aspirational piece for sure, twenty grand's worth of vintage horology. These were not grungy bikers. These were the other sort, the gentlemen bikers Lionel had spoken about.

They were arguing gently about the merits of camping, and how camping was the ideal way of touring on a bike except for lugging the tent around, and why had no one thought of hiring tents out at campsites.

They were too far away, and too absorbed in their conversation to eavesdrop on him, but the old folk were closer, and hardly discrete in

their gawping. He felt their eyes upon him, wished Anica would lower her voice a little. Anica smiled, rose a moment to ask the biker gentlemen if they wanted anything else. She cleared plates, brought Finn his coffee and sat down with him again.

She lowered her voice. "You were injured?"

But now her lips were so expressive, so careful in getting around every word, he felt sure the whole cafe could read them.

"Yes."

"How?"

He broke into a sweat. Of course no one could hear them. He couldn't make out what anyone else was saying over the babble. "How? Short version: my wife's lover hit me with a baseball bat. I was in hospital for a bit, stayed with a friend for a while after that."

"And now you are back?"

"For a while at least."

"Finn, I want to thank you, for being with my sister."

"Well, I was there with Hermione. Hermione saw your sister first. Ran over to where she,... where she was. I went to help Hermione. I'm sorry, Anica. It was a terrible thing, and I came away thinking we'd probably never know who she was. But we did nothing. There was nothing we could do. We were just,... there."

"She came here for work. No one reports her missing. We think it was the cockle gangs she worked with, except no one will admit to seeing her. And you must not underestimate what you did, Mr Finn. To be there is enough, to be there with,... compassion."

"Are the police involved? I told Hermione to tell the police about the cockle gangs."

"No one is interested in my dead sister, Mr Finn. Only you and Hermione showed her any compassion."

Sadly, Finn suspected she was right. "But don't you want to know how she came to drown? Don't you want to know who was responsible?"

"It will change anything you think? No one will admit to seeing her. These people are ghosts. She has already been replaced. No one cares, Mr Finn. This is the world we live in, now."

Finn was both moved and appalled by her matter of fact analysis. Was it true? Was this the world we lived in now?

"Except," she went on. "I will make a difference for her. I am living here now with Hermione. I have passport. I am citizen of European Union. I have not a paid job yet, but am claiming no British benefits. I am not 'sponge'. I bake cakes for her. You would like one? Today I have what you call I think Parkin and Tea Bread."

She was easy with him. Open. She couldn't possibly be like this with everyone. It was like she knew him, perhaps through conversation with Hermione, but shyness definitely was not one of her characteristics.

"Em,... perhaps later."

"All right. But listen, I see Hermione coming now. I think she may be cross with you, Mr Finn, but be patient, she does not mean it."

The biker boys were on their way out when Hermione came in. She bade them a cheery goodbye and a safe journey while unbuttoning her heavy coat. Finn watched her, struck by her freshness, her energy, and the warmth of her smile - also the genuine affection in which she was held by her biker-boys.

She did not see him until Anica pointed him out, and he knew at once the depth of things between them by her look. It was quick, serious, and then the smile. Anica was wrong. Hermione was not angry with him at all.

It would be easier if she had been.

Chapter Forty Four

So, she sits across the table, eyes focused in such a way he cannot avoid them. She's wanting him to look her in the eye, but he looks aside. She catches him with a tilt of the head, guides him back to the middle, to the centre of her. He's different - hair close shaved, and the scar. He looks pale, tired, ill. And there's something else. Something big. An argument with his wife perhaps?

She forgives him for everything, indeed cannot remember what she has to forgive him for. It's just so good to see him again. "Finn, darlin'?"

As if on cue the cafe empties. Hermione looks up as her customers say their goodbyes. Again he notes how well she's liked, universally loved, because she loves universally in return. Finn doesn't know if he should be relieved at this exodus, by this renewed intimacy or terrified by it. He gazes after the last of the old folk as if he wants to call them back, to protect him against saying too much. The door jingles, calls time. The silence of the cafe swells around them.

Anica settles at the counter, sinks her head into the pad, eavesdrops only half discreetly.

He thinks, then says: "I'm,... " He catches it before it escapes, then reconsiders, releases it, a winged dove of hope, he thinks: "I'm sorry, Hermione."

"Sorry?"

"I should have called you. A lot's happened."

She reaches out, lightly touches the scar on his temple. He does not pull away, does not twitch like the last time she touched him. He closes his eyes a fraction, breathes out as if to accept her into a deeper part of himself. She does not ask what happened, how he got the scar.

It does not matter.

"Does it still hurt?" she asks.

He shakes his head, is stuck for words now so she says: "I got a call, from Carina. Friend of yours?"

"Carina, yes. We were colleagues. Friends. At the hospital. I know she

spoke to you. I was completely out of it then."

"You stayed with Carina?"

"For a bit. I went home afterwards. Things are,..." He takes a breath, looks away, the words once more flown. He is overwhelmed.

She catches his gaze as it slides away again, pulls him back to the centre, suggests: "Complicated?"

"Yes, complicated."

"But now you're back?"

"For a while, I think."

For a while? He thinks? This isn't as good as she'd hoped - still something pulling him away from Carrickbar, back to his life in Aylesbury. Wife, kids, house: the family Finn?

Or is it Carina?

Then he says: "Helena,..."

"Oh? Helena?" Is he really going to talk about Helena now? Is she wrong about the family Finn? Is Carina really just a friend and colleague? Is Helena the complication she should be wondering about. Has Helena won him away with her sultry looks and her assertive ways.

Finn goes on, halting. "She,..."

Helena what? Helena has done what? Bitch!

Finn is still searching for the words, incoherent, blushing. Hermione is starting to panic."Helena what, Finn?"

"She,... sort of,... came for me."

"Helena went to see you? All the way to Aylesbury?"

"Yes. You gave her my address, she said. So she came. Asked me to drive her home, so here I am."

Is he saying this the only reason he came back? Because Helena asked him to? "I'm sorry, Finn. I found your address in your wallet that time. Nosey of me, I know. Then Helena was asking. We were wondering if you were okay. You know what she's like. I didn't think for a minute she'd actually travel all that way to see you."

"Well, she did."

"I'm glad."

But she's not sure if she's glad at all, that Helena went, because a lot must have passed between them she doesn't know about now, a lot of intimacies. But she is at least pleased to see Finn.

So tell him, girl: "Well,... it's,... nice to see you, Finn."

Finn is still searching for a way through the muddle. He's clearly not himself yet. He should not have driven all that way. He needs more rest. "Helena's strange,... isn't she? Amazing. Terrifying. Strange."

She laughs, but there is a defence in it that puts Finn on his toes. "You've always had a thing about her." She's teasing him on the surface, teasing in her tone, but deadly serious underneath.

Yes, he's always had a thing for her.

Think carefully how you answer, Finn.

Finn does indeed think about this. Yes, it's obvious the way Helena dazzles you. "Well," he says, "not in the way I think you're thinking."

"A woman travels all that way to see you. I mean, come on. What does that tell you?"

What's this, Minnie? Revealing your jealousy? Batting him in Helena's direction? Or are you testing him? Are you seeing how he will come back at you?

'Testing him I think.'

'Your fault anyway Minnie; you gave Helena his address.'

Finn takes a breath, deflects her volley, grows more serious, less defensive, does not deny there may be something between him and

Helena. So, did she bed him? What's she like in bed, she wonders? Is she as bossy as she is at other times? Is she intriguing, inventive, confidently erotic, and above all expertly filthy? How can she compete with that? She can barely remember sex at all, real sex that is.

Sex with Mr Hardy does not count.

"I also need to explain why I left," he says.

Oh, now this is more promising. He waits for permission to proceed, which she grants with a nod.

"I was afraid," he tells her.

"Of me?" she asks.

"Not of you exactly, no. More what I'm starting to feel, when I'm around you. And when I think of you."

Hermione feels this as a vibration in her stomach and in her thighs, and as a melting in her breast. The wave travels up her thighs, cool and tingly, meets in the middle, goes off like a sparkly firework, with a bang and a feathery tickle. Ooh, long time since she felt that! Now, why does she imagine there's a "but" coming? Does he think she'll reject him? Has he already rejected himself?

"But,..."

"Oh, please! No buts Finn. You can't say that and then say there's a but."

"You know there's a 'but'. There has to be a 'but'. There'll always be a 'but' with me"

"Finn, darlin', listen. You either feel something or you don't. There can't be any buts about it. So, do you feel something or not? Simple question."

"Yes I do. From the moment I met you."

Hermione resists the lengthening of her smile - too much like a victory, like satisfaction, and she will not have him see that. Not yet. She'll allow herself the pleasure of it later. But for now Finn is definitely on the hook and she must land him properly.

"Look," she says. "I know you're not exactly a man without baggage, if that's what you're meanin' with your 'but'. And it's not that I'm unsympathetic to all of that, you know? You may not understand this, but for now none of that matters to me."

"But,.."

"Listen, Finn. One more question."

"Just one more? You sure?"

"One simple question. Simple answer."

"Okay, shoot."

"Have you slept with Helena?"

This was not the question he was expecting. But it was at least easier to answer than the one he was thinking of. "Why does everyone assume I've slept with Helena?"

"Cos you're a nice guy, and if she said so, you'd do it."

"Well she's not said so, and I haven't. And,... what's more she wouldn't, and anyway, even if she did, I wouldn't."

"Take that as a definite no then."

She nods to herself, believes him, presses his hands gently. Whatever his relationship with Helena it's not the obvious one. "So, 'nough said on that score - I mean what with little miss big ears over there listenin' in. And her English better 'n mine."

"But,..."

"Told you not to spoil it with your buts."

Finn persists: "I can't offer you anything, Hermione. I have nothing. I'm looking at such a long road ahead of me, and I've no idea where it's heading."

"Well, don't know what you think you're offerin' me, Finn. But so far as I'm concerned you're already offerin' what I'm wanting from you. And I

accept it. 'Cos I feel something for you too. It's simple as that."

She sees the flash of fear in him. The thing he wants but dares not want. Typical. "I value you, as a friend, Hermione."

"I know what you're saying Finn and, all respect and that, but we already got each other as friends. And I don't want to be just friends with you any more."

Finn makes the leap to sex, to the unspoken thing between them. "It can't mean nothing to me," he saying now, and not for the first time. Weird. "It'll change things, change me, change everything," he's saying. "And there's all this other stuff, all this crap in the way of any kind of future. So don't you see?.."

"I see it all right. Learned that from last time we spoke. And it won't."

"Won't?"

"Mean nothin'. To me. Trust me on that. What kind of girl do you think I am?"

"But it can't mean everything either."

"Because?"

"Because there isn't room in me yet for something so big as that."

"No?"

She looks now to see if Anica is listening. Anica is pretending not to, snatches her eyes back to the pad on which she doodles. Hermione squeezes Finn's hands, lowers her voice, draws her face closer to his. "I love you, Finn," she says. "I love you, and I want you. Now, you deal with that however you like. But let me know one way or the other. Okay?"

A fresh biker crowd pulls in, bikes thumping outside the window, vibrating the glass. She looks up, recognises one of the guys from a previous visit. He waves, grins, she waves back. They're coming in. The Sea View Cafe is about to get busy again.

"So," she says. "Want me to come round yours later? We can talk some more, and I'll listen to all your buts. Then I'm guessing we should

just go to bed and be done with it."

Finn dare not say the word, but he wants her so much, is completely seduced by her, wants to make love so much with her, it hurts, so he nods.

"Be round 'bout eight then," she says.

She gives him space, retreats behind the counter and watches while Finn drinks up. She notes there's a tremor as he brings the cup to his lips - maybe still shaken from accident, maybe nerves. But he'll be okay. She can fix that. She can fix him. Nothing like holding a man to her breast for healing him. She's trying not to float, trying not to smile, trying not to respond to the school-girlish smirks Anica is giving her. He's not a bad looking man, probably forgotten everything about sex he ever knew - like her then. They'll have to take it slow. Oh, please God let him be as decent and considerate a lover as she imagines he will be.

He leaves. He's blushing, nods his head in parting, offers an awkward little wave to Anica, bangs his toe on the door on the way out so the chimes give an extra little jingle. When he's safely gone, Anica explodes with excitement. Hermione checks her. "Not a word, Annie."

Anica giggles. "I say nothing. I hear nothing. I know nothing."

"Good." Hermione realises then she never did ask him about his accident, and that scar.

"Scar?" says Ancia. "Oh, this is easy, Minnie. Wife's lover hit him with a baseball bat."

"What?"

"This is very dramatic, no?"

"His wife has a lover?"

"He didn't tell you?"

"No."

"This makes me curious. So, things are easier then, for you and Finn? Him not being so married now as you thought he was before?"

"Ordinarily it might, but this is Finn Finucane we're talking about."

"Hmm. Maybe,,... I understand what you mean. So, anyway,... you have condoms?"

"What? You cheeky little madam! No,.. actually."

"You are menopausal?"

Hermione gives a patient sigh. "Not yet."

"Then I have condoms. How many you are thinking? One? Two?" She raises her eyebrows. "You are thinking *three*?"

"I'll be fine, thank you. And where did you get condoms?"

"You must never trust the man with precautions, Minnie. Does your mother never teach you this?"

"My mother didn't teach me much that was any use, Annie. So it was a good thing I grew up not being stupid."

She realises she has no nice underwear. And she's not about to give herself to Finn in a pair of tatty mummy-pants, and an ill matching bra. "You'll mind the shop later, Annie, while I nip out to Weston?"

"Of course. My pleasure. I had no idea English women could be so commanding when it comes to sex. Really this opens my eyes."

"You ever had sex, Annie?"

"But of course I have."

"I'll take that as a no then. You wouldn't be smirking like that if you had. And trust me, darlin', first time with any man, it's best to just get it out the way."

Chapter Forty Five

Finn took the long way home, heading in completely the wrong direction, up past Helena's house and beyond. He hoped Helena was not at home and watching or she would want to know why he did not call.

Hermione? Him and Hermione?

Why not?

Kathleen had moved on. He was not married any more. Not really. And Hermione had just called him to her bed - well, to his own bed actually, but it meant the same thing.

And why should that worry him? Is this not why he had come to Carrickbar in the first place? To escape the old life? To start again? Sure, but he'd not expected to find a woman here who actually wanted him. Carrickbar was the last place on earth to find love, to find romance, to find the comfort of companionship.

Was he right in that?

She'd definitely said she'd wanted him, hadn't she? Definitely said they'd be going to bed.

But how had she meant it? The wanting. Was it purely in the carnal sense, or more that she wanted to be 'with' him, that when she felt the need to turn intimately to a man, she wanted that man to be him? And was anywhere not home if there was a woman to share it? But how could he make Carrickbar his home? It was just this dull shivery ache of a place, existing out at the edge of possibility, at the edge of reason. Only Hermione made it bearable, made it possible.

She was definitely coming round later.

But had he got that right? Did that mean what he thought it meant? Well, of course. She'd said so hadn't she? Was his bed okay? Could they - dare he even say it - do 'it' there? His place wasn't bad, but certainly not as conducive to romance as hers. And he had no condoms, and she was hardly likely to be on the pill, and she didn't look old enough to be menopausal enough not to require precautions, not that it was sensible of either of them to think of doing it unprotected anyway because of STDs and stuff. And he couldn't produce condoms,

or it would seem presumptuous, if that's not what she'd intended, yet irresponsible if it was.

But she's already said.

Slow down! Long time since you thought about these things. Long time since you asked these questions. And you have forgotten the answers - if you even knew them in the first place.

Fuck's sake, Finn!

Suddenly he realised he was looking at a meadow containing the closed up shell of an old shower block. He recognised it from memories of family snapshots. There was an overgrown hedge, a curve of gravel driveway. It was the old camp-site on the hill. The vans were long gone, just the old weed infested gravel pitches and hookup points remaining, the whole scene yet another pane in the tapestry of Carrickbar's decline. But the setting had something of the old charm - the elevation, the church spire rising between low hills, and the sea beyond - flat and grey today, but glittering at the first hint of sun.

The meadow was for sale, as was the meadow beside it. Agriculture was no longer the thing in England, and land was being sold off to nouveaux-riche privateers to put their horse-boxes on instead. But people had to eat, didn't they? Or did we buy our food from the far east as well? At what point did this off-shoring stop? At what point did it become too expensive even for us to keep our own chickens?

Why was he thinking about this now? He was hiding from other things, other thoughts.

'Thoughts, Finn?'

'Well, what if I can't,... you know,... do it?'

'Hell, Finn,...'

But wait. What about this campsite thing? Hadn't those gentlemen bikers been talking about camping just now?

It had not escaped his attention that his fellow Brits, like most European tourists had begun shunning the hot and sandy places for fear of gun toting maniacs and machete toting self-immolators. But in coming home for their holidays, they wanted more than they'd had in

the 1970's. They were by now a mobile and relatively cosmopolitan bunch, bred on social media, and with short attention spans. They liked to pretend they were living on the edge of something, while at the same time moaning on Tripseeker if they so much as found a snail in their salad.

'Let's think about camping, Finn. Not Caravans.'

'No, let's think about sex!'

'No, I don't want to think about sex right now, I want to think about camping pods.'

'Pods?'

He was thinking the kind of guy who rode a bike worth twenty grand, and wore a watch worth upwards of five, wasn't going to be happy with a mouldy old tent in the corner of a muddy field. He'd prefer comfort, a bit of eco-chic, he'd want a shower block without shit on the floor, somewhere half way warm to trim his beard, and a cosy shag-pad for him and his girl, one he didn't have to pack up at the end of the trip and lug home.

And he wanted a cafe down the road, for the sausages he couldn't be bothered frying for himself. Indeed, what Mr Patek Phillipe wanted, decided Finn, in the middle of that muddy field, was a cute little wooden glamping pod, and a near half decent centrally heated shower block. And if the King James could get its act together, and stock up on the real ale vibe, they'd stand a chance of a slice of that action too.

What action was that, Finn? The re-branding of Carrickbar as a little known gem of a gentrified short-haul tourist destination? Nowhere in England was that remote any more. They must have been within an hour's ride of twenty million people.

He'd ask Lionel if he knew who was selling the field.

Not that he was serious.

Just curious

A little further on Finn found a path that ran down through dunes to the beach. He'd no idea how he'd managed to come this far. He followed the path to a rocky cove. It sloped down through pines, their scent

refreshing, carried on the whistle of the wind. There was a strip of wet sand, the tide going out and the way south clear all the way back to the harbour. Finn took off his shoes and socks and began to walk. The sand felt stinging cold at first, but something in it revived him, relaxed him.

'Have I got this right, Finn? You want to run a campsite for gentleman bikers?'

'I don't know. It's just an idea. Okay?'

He was seeing Hermione tonight, and whatever happened it would be all right. He could perhaps test her resolve by showing her his watch collection. The thought of it made him laugh. You sad sack, Finn. You've no idea what women want, have you? Even after nearly half a century they are still a mystery to you.

He heard his name, carried on the wind, above the slosh of the sea, and a figure came running up to him - Kyle.

"Hi Finn."

Kyle was pleased to see him, beaming, which both daunted Finn and caused a swell of emotion that came close to love. It reminded him once more how shallow was his capacity to nurture people, and how full was Hermione's. If he had to start repairing this deficiency, Kyle was a good place to start.

Kyle carried a sack bulging with rubbish.

"Hi Kyle. What you got there, mate?"

"Plastic bottles." He pulled out an empty bottle of mineral water to show. It was a premium brand, now added to the mountain of beach-side detritus. "I've got to check the triangle, see?" He showed Finn the little recycling motif on the bottom of the bottle. "If it's got this triangle on it, I can recycle it. I take them to a guy down the harbour, and he pays me by weight."

"Sounds great."

Actually, it sounded poor - a decent lad with a big heart, slaving first for a grumpy old scold of a newsagent, and now picking up bits of plastic crap off the beach. "Is there,... em,... a lot of money in that?"

Kyle smiled, embarrassed by his own enthusiasm. "Not much," he said. "But I get to clean the beach up."

"Well, it could do with that for sure. And there's never going to be a shortage of plastic washing up around here."

Kyle wore a Hi-Vis jacket and thick gloves, like a council worker. "I collect other stuff too," he said. "But you can't recycle much of that so I put it in the council bins down by the harbour wall."

"The council pays you to do that?" This sounded more promising, a toe in with the local council, but Kyle shook his head. "Nah, I just like to tidy up. Hermione's always going on about how messy the beach is." He looked awkward for a moment. "Heard you were back. Mum said."

"Yes, I'm back. Your mum okay?"

"Oh, she's fine, I think." And then, after another awkward hesitation: "You and mum, Finn. Are you seeing each other?"

Not this again.

"Well, not in the way you're probably thinking, Kyle."

"I mean I'd be fine with it, really."

"You would? Well,... that's good to know. Listen, I think your mum's a great lady. Brave, confident, wise. And I'm glad to be her friend. She's helped me a lot. Talks a lot of sense. But we're not,... you know?"

There were not lovers, he meant to say, but could not quite bring himself to spell it out. Was it merely delicacy, or was there a lingering desire that it should not be entirely discounted?

No, of course he discounted it. He and Hermione were lovers now. Or at least they would be.

Soon.

Had he really got that right?

Kyle nodded, gave nothing away, changed the subject: "Hermione,... well she says she's ordering some gravel for the tea garden at the Sea

View. Asked if I'd come spread it."

"Oh? That's good."

"Will you help, Finn?"

"Sure, Kyle. Just let me know when."

"Okay." Another pause and then: "You met Anica yet?"

"Yes. Met her earlier."

"She's really nice."

"Indeed she is Kyle."

"Beautiful. You think she's beautiful?"

"I'd say so, definitely, yes. You like her?"

"Definitely. But I get confused when I'm in the cafe and she's there. I say the wrong things and I start to sweat. So,..."

"So?"

"So I haven't been going in much. You don't think Hermione will think I'm not friends with her any more because of that do you?"

"Ah,... you're asking me to imagine myself into the head of a woman?"

Kyle nods. "I guess."

"I don't think any man can do that, Kyle. At least not and expect to get it right. I can explain things to Hermione if you like."

"Oh no,... please don't say anything. I feel like an idiot."

"Well, it's a tough one, Kyle. I used to feel the same way about,..." Finn had been about to say Kathleen and he realised how easily he'd forgotten the early days, how much he'd wanted her and how little he'd expected her to want him. And now she was wanting someone else, hadn't wanted Finn for a long time, and he'd not known a thing about it, and he should be hurting over that, but he wasn't, and he wasn't because he was still falling. It was going to be one hell of a landing. Or

was it like Helena said, that you never got over the person you were with until you met someone else? "I used to feel the same way about a girl once," he said.

You sound like Methuselah, Finn.

"Oh, and what happened?"

"I married her, had two kids with her, both a bit older than you now. Spent twenty five years of my life with her. Now she's off with some other chap because she thought I was a dork. I'm not the best role model when it comes to romance, Kyle."

"Romance? Oh,.. I don't think she's going to look at me that way. I think she thinks I'm funny."

"Well, funny's good. A man who can make a girl laugh - I mean really laugh - he can make her do,.. well,... take it from me, funny's good."

"No, I don't mean funny like that. I mean strange."

"Strange? She thinks's you're strange? She said anything?"

"No,... she's always really nice with me, but... well. She's bound to think I'm strange. Because I am. A bit. Aren't I?"

"You imagine she thinks you're strange?" Finn placed a fatherly arm around Kyle's shoulder, drew him into intimacy, against the wind and the sea. "Listen, like I said, Kyle, a guy should never try to imagine his way into the head of a woman. He never gets it right. As for being strange, mate,... we're all strange in our own way. There's no such thing as,.. well,... normal. The question is can people accept us for what we are? And if they can't that's their problem, not ours."

They combed the beach together, heading gradually back to the harbour, Finn helping collect the washed up bottles. He also found a hoard of smooth-worn multicoloured glass, decorative enough for him to pocket it. Then there were plastic fertiliser bags, miscellaneous bits of cars, tennis balls, a long dead dog, and the wafer thin husk of a coconut that he guessed must have come all the way from the Caribbean. By the time they reached the harbour they had three sacks and Kyle enough daylight for one more sweep.

"Careful what you pick up though eh, Kyle. Not everything around here

is as harmless as it sometimes looks."

Chapter Forty Six

The supermarket in Weston prides itself on offering the customer a lot of choice, and all of it is exactly the same as you'd get in the supermarket in Lancaster, or Carlisle, or Manchester, or any town between. They sell everything, causing all the little shops in town that once sold those same things to close and become charity shops, or the offices of loan shark companies, no-win-no-fee solicitors, and fly-by-night financial advisers.

But Hermione does not like supermarket clothes. Buy cheap, buy twice, her mother used to say. As a counter to this sage advice, she noted the charity shops were often better for quality, and value of course, but charity shops draw the line at underwear, and she's desperate for some half way decent frillies. Trouble is, supermarket frillies are either too tarty or too plain, or they make her itch.

She's settled for some plain lilac things in a soft cotton-elastane, with just a bit of lace trim. She doesn't want to come across as cheap, or sophisticated - just plain, sweet, and a little sexy. The main thing though is the colours, that top and bottom are actually the same

She shoves them in her basket, irritated at her indecision over a pair of pants and a bra. I mean, after all, once the blouse comes off, she recalls, frillies are never on long enough to make any kind of gender-political statement, and even if they were, such subtleties were generally lost on men anyway.

More important is the wine.

She supposes Finn drinks alcohol. Certainly, in spite of an obvious and rather endearing innocence in certain other matters, there's nothing about him to suggest a puritanical streak - otherwise theirs will be a short lived relationship, and Helena's welcome to him. But she reasons a glass of nice red wine will take the edge off both their nerves.

She does not mean that,... about Helena, and feels a certain satisfaction at potentially bedding one of the few beddable men in Carrickbar ahead of one of the few beddable women. But is she really sure this is a good idea? Is it not just another man she is bound to end up despising for not respecting her?

She's searching the wine aisle when she realises there's a man watching her. She doesn't recognise him, but he stands there plain as

day, arms folded, a kind of smug look on his face as if she should know him and he's waiting for her to recognise him. One of her Biker boys perhaps? Nah!

He wears nice pressed Chinos, casual blue shirt, plain cream jacket. His hair is dark, running to grey, nicely cut she thinks, with shaved sides and an expressive bounce on top. Indeed, quite stylish. Who the f,...

Wait a minute.

It's like peering at someone you know through blurry glass. Slowly the features come out, aided by the body language.

Squinty?

Well, I never! What happened to him? Must be on a date.

"Hello John. You're looking very smart today. Almost didn't recognise you."

He's pleased by her reaction, pleased she seems pleased to see him. "I do clean up now an' then," he says.

Indeed. She even admits to herself, though begrudgingly, he's almost good looking suddenly - I mean for a man of his age. There's just something else about him that makes him ugly. It's his smile perhaps, in the always down turned corners of his mouth, and the cock-sure tilt of his head at times, plus an underlying ignorance - all things that add up to the same: untrustworthy.

"So, what you doing here then?" she asks.

"Saw you coming in. Wondered how long it would take for you to recognise me."

Saw her coming in? So he's been there for ages, including all that time in the lingerie aisle. She feels a shiver. He comes over, invades her space, eyes the contents of her basket.

"Nice," he says. "Though I'd've gone for the black." He's putting his fingers in to touch the underwear but she swings the basket out of his reach. Loathesome man! His hands are cleanish for once, but the oil is grained into the pores and will take years to come out, and his

fingernails are as shapeless and ridged as busted seashells. The thought of him touching her things conjures up the same revulsion as the thought of him touching her skin. She can hardly wear them for Finn now, or she'll be thinking of Squinty at the crucial moment. She'll have to choose another set.

Come on, Minny, fight back. Show some spirit girl.

"Took you for more of a stockings and suspenders man, John."

No,... this man does not get irony, Minny, nor veiled insult.

He'll just think you're trying to turn him on.

"Can't deny that," he says. "Easy enough to imagine on you too." His pupils are dilating to a base arousal. There you go. Done it now. "Fancy a coffee?" he asks.

What?

He's asking you to sit down with him, Minny, you ninny. And she might have done too, were he any other man half interested in her, and she had to let him down gently. There are ways of dancing around men, letting them down without puncturing their egos, of making them feel good without actually giving them what they want. But Squinty wears his intentions all the time like a stain on his shirt. He doesn't want to see you dance. He just wants to see you naked.

"Well thanks John, but I'm in a hurry, darlin'. Got to get back to the Sea View. Show Annie how to cash up."

Dark flicker then. She's disappointed him. Her stomach gives a heave. Not good. Go away, Squinty, you're spoiling my day. "So,.. maybe another time then," she says.

He's not for moving, stands his ground, feet apart, hands in his pockets now, gut protruding towards her, grey belly hairs showing through a gap in his hastily tucked shirt. His newly polished persona is tarnishing already, his newly spruced appearance unravelling, fraying at the edges. She imagines copious grey pubes, feels nauseous.

"Em,... be seein' you then." She's backing away, turns, feels his eyes on her bottom.

Don't you follow me Squinty. Call it a day now darlin'. Take the fuckin' hint.

She's unsettled, contemplates the escalator back up to the lingerie department, but whatever she chooses now she's likely to be reminded of this unfortunate encounter, which means poor Finn's in for the unalluring shock of her plain mumsies and an ill matching bra after all.

And she's not picked up any wine.

The whole trip's been a waste of time.

She dumps the basket and walks out into the onset of dusk, a cold wind at her throat. She risks a backwards glance, imagines he's still there, some distance away, maybe following, maybe not. She curses herself for behaving like a frightened rabbit. What was it Helena said about intimidation being in the eyes? She shouldn't be so nice to him. Some men don't take the hint. They think no is yes, until you slap them.

The Ka feels cold and damp, it starts with a reassuring urgency and she pulls away sharp. It's a long road back to Carrickbar, and not enough light to see what's behind - just the anonymous glare of headlights. It might be Squinty's Landrover keeping pace some distance back - not aggressive, just there. And so what if it is, for how else is Squinty to get back to Carrickbar himself if it's not by this same road?

The Ka starts to shudder. It loses power, regains it, shudders on a bit more, then dies. There's just enough momentum to get it to a lay-by. She sits there for a moment feeling the rug pulled from under her. The car has stopped. It's broken down. She has to say these things out loud before she can believe them:

'Car stopped.'

'Broken down.'

'Fuck!

Obviously the gods do not intend for an easy tryst between her and Finn. Perhaps they are even offended by the thought of it. Well, would they rather she shagged Squinty Mulligan?

'No, don't say that. Don't even think it.'

It's all right. Calm down, girl. Still plenty of time to get back and not have the day completely spoiled. And the best things are worth a bit of a struggle. A quick call to the RAC, lone woman, blah di blah - and they'll be here in no time. Tow the wreck back to Weston, or have the patrol guy push it into the sea, save her the trouble and expense of getting it fixed. Would they do that? Then it's a call to Finn, silly girlish voice, damsel in distress, and he'll come get her, take her home to where it's warm.

But before she can do any of this, a Landrover pulls in front of her - Squinty gets out with a shopping bag, taps on the window. She winds it down a crack.

"Forgot your shopping, love," he says. "Having a spot of trouble?"

He's paid for the underwear, wants her to take it. She looks at him blank, unbelieving.

No way is she taking it.

"I'm fine, John. RAC's on the way," she lies.

"But they'll be ages. Probably something and nothing. Move over. I'll have a fiddle with it."

"It's all right, John. I'm fine, thanks,.. really,.."

He's yanked open the door, is twisting the starter key. She can smell his aftershave, lots of it, and good stuff too. It mingles unpleasantly with his breath and the overpowering heat of him. She shrinks aside, even more unsettled by this strange new Squinty, slides over to the passenger seat, grabs her bag. Squinty pops the bonnet, fiddles with the leads. She gets out, but it's cold and she's shivering.

"Go sit in mine," he says. "It's likely the coil."

"I'm all right," she replies. But it's very cold, and blowing for snow, and she thinks about it - thinks about getting into his car. "Coil? Is that,..." she about to say 'serious', says instead: "Expensive?"

"Na. Cheap as chips on this car. Best I can do is give you a ride back, get you a new coil in the morning."

Okay. That might work. He is a mechanic after all - sort of - isn't he? She just has to get around the small problem of accepting a lift home from him. Like sweets from strangers, you simply don't do certain things when your instincts are telling you otherwise. But what's the problem? He's an unwholesome lummox for sure, but there can't be *that* much harm in him. A lift gets her back to Carrickbar in time for a hot bath, and her meeting with Finn.

And that's all that matters.

She can handle Squinty.

She nods, Squinty locks the Ka, tosses her the keys. She gets into the Landrover. Squinty's a moment round the back before climbing in, then hands her the shopping. "Wouldn't mind seeing you in those one day," he says.

"Well,... didn't want them John, so you shouldn't have bothered."

He tosses the bag into the back and sits a while, turns half way towards her, eyes wide, grinning stupidly at something. He's not grinning at her, not exactly, more something he's done, some joke,... and the joke's on her.

At first she doesn't understand, then realises there's something hanging out of his trousers, or rather something perky protruding from them and resting its head on the steering wheel.

Squinty is, if nothing else, at least impressively endowed.

"All right, John. Now you listen to me, darlin'. You put that away and zip up your pants like a good boy and we'll say no more ‘bout it."

"Ride for a ride?" he says, something more of a hopeful enquiry than a demand. He's still grinning.

"Like I said,... just,.."

"Okay, don't want sex or nothing - just, touch it like."

She can't believe she's hearing this, can't believe he'd actually do this, like it was,... *normal*. What planet is this guy on. "You want me to touch it?"

Squinty nods.

"Let me get this straight. I jerk you off, you give me a ride home? If I don't, you leave me sitting at the roadside in the freezing cold, waiting for the RAC?"

Squinty's not sure if this is what he intends. Probably not. He's joshing, seeing how far he can go, but still,... "Something like that. Nothing ventured,... eh, lass?"

She's wondering about his arms, how strong they are. She can run, while most likely he can't do more than a few yards without doubling over, but if he gets hold of her first in the confines of the cab?

"No way." she says.

"Aw come on, girly. Where's the harm?"

"'Cos I said no, John. And 'no' means 'no'."

"You want it, really. I know you do. I seen the way you look at me, and the way you dress sometimes, when you know I'm coming up the caff"

What?

There'd been a date once, she recalls, years ago. A steamed up car on a windy cliff-top. She'd said no, several times as she recalled, but the guy just waited until she stopped saying 'no' and took that as her acquiescence. She'd let him do it anyway, telling herself he was probably right, that actually she'd meant yes. when actually all a long she'd definitely meant no.

In the morning she'd felt cheap, and he was no longer interested. He'd hung the condom out on the barbed wire fence that ran along the cliff edge. And there it had danced in the wind like a score on a ticksheet. Maybe it was that that had made her angry, as much as Squinty sitting there, proud as punch, and confident of his way, with his junk hanging out in full expectation, that it was nothing unusual, and how he "knew" she wanted it, even if the thought of it was making her feel sick.

She calms herself with a deep breath.

"So," she says. "How 'bout a blow job instead?"

"Eh?" Squinty is flummoxed, unable to read the obvious danger in her tone, thinks perhaps he's really scored, misreads the fire in her eyes, mistakes it for lust.

"What do I get for that?" she presses him. "You fix my car for free and bring it round the Sea View? That a deal?"

"Em,.."

"No? Oh! Thought you'd be up for that. You drive a hard bargain, darlin' All righty,.. how 'bout I let you shove that giant cucumber of yours up my little bum hole good 'n deep, till my eyes water and I'm squealin' like a little piggy. How 'bout that, then? Will that get me a ride home and my car fixed for free?"

Squinty's eyes are wide, his mouth dry at the prospect, the blood pounding in his ears. He cannot speak.

"There now, that got your attention dint it. So,... I'm just going reach in my bag now," she says. "Cos, I got a little somethin' in here 'specially for you."

Squinty is thinking it's a condom. It's not exactly what he wants, but the thought of her rolling it over his length persuades him it might not be a bad idea, and certainly worth anticipating, except suddenly he's staring at an aerosol of body spray.

He moves. She's not sure if it's towards her or away, only sudden, and she's afraid of his arms, so she empties the can in his direction. He shrinks into the corner of the cab, screaming.

"Except I said no, John. Remember? Now you stay away from me, and you stay away from the Sea View in future. You've gone too far this time."
But Squinty has other things on his mind, like his stinging eyes and the fact he thinks he's gone blind. Hermione steps out of the Landrover, is momentarily concerned for him, but reasons it was the only thing she could do, that most rapes are carried out by people you know, and it's better not to be raped, than to have second thoughts about how hard to fight the bastard off. And no one actually went blind from getting body spray in their eyes, did they?

His tone now is threatening enough that she feels justified, that she did

not over-react. She can hear him, muffled through the glass - words like fucking, filthy, bitch, tart, whore, and then, weakly, pleading: "I was only having you on."

She goes back to the Ka, locks herself inside. Who to call? Finn? No,... that's dead now. How can she call, or even see Finn now? At least not tonight while the memory of Squinty's perky member is so fresh. But who else is there with a car to come and get her? Lionel? Too nosey by far and she would have to explain, plus he'd probably end up using it as a scene in one of his novels.

She keeps a weather eye on Squinty as she lifts the phone. Is he getting out? Is he going to batter on the glass, tear the door off its hinges and drag her over into the bushes? No, he's wiping the last of the sting from his eyes. And now, finally, he's driving away.

Hermione gasps as her stomach convulses. Then she's retching and trembling but there's not enough inside of her to vomit. Who to call? She's only a little surprised when she realises the one person she needs to see most of all, right now,...

Is Helena.

Chapter Forty Seven

"So, you want we go fix him?"

"No, Helena. I already fixed him. I just want we go home."

Helena, fur coat - politically incorrect and probably real - hair brushed out and shining. Why does Hermione always imagine she has no knickers on? She wonders too if Helena has paused to do her hair after the phone call? Dab of perfume too? Or had she just been sitting there like that, flicking languidly through a lifestyle magazine, ready to launch into stylish action?

Anyway, the car is warm and Hermione is sinking into the leather of the seat, Helena driving in the same manner as she speaks, assertively, eccentrically. She's trying to pass the car in front.

"Fuck this dozy cretin."

"It's all right, Helena. There's no rush."

"You are all right with this? With what has happened?"

Meaning what? Does she feel traumatised, victimised, weepy? Or just humiliated? "I'm okay," she says "I mean 'part from feeling like I've been rubbed all over with shit. Maybe I over reacted. He might have been joking. He said he was joking afterwards."

Helena raises a cold eyebrow. "After exposing himself and asking for a hand job in exchange for a ride home? And you get angry, so he saves face by saying he was only joking? Trust me Hermione. This is not a good joke. Man jokes that way with me he finds I have no sense of humour pretty quick."

Hermione ventures a laugh. "He'll stink of Mum for weeks." Then covers her face, embarrassed, still unable to take it in. Squinty Mulligan! The old fool. Whatever made him think she'd say 'yes' to that?

Helena picks up on the lightening of Hermione's mood, sees it as a way in to further ease her upset. "So, now you have seen the Squinty man's balls. How was he? Seriously, I'm curious."

"What? Oh,... *big*. I mean we're talking flipping donkey here. Wait, no

shut up, I'm, trying not to think about it."

"This is not what I expected. Man like that with big dick can be big problem for woman. We need fix him properly."

"How?"

"I don't know, but I will enjoy thinking of something."

"Let's just leave it, eh? I've got a bigger problem now."

"Oh?"

"How to get out of seeing Finn, when I more or less promised him we'd be, well,... getting it together tonight."

"You are seeing Finn? Oh, the gods be praised. At last you both see sense."

"No,.. I mean, that was the idea, but how can I go through with it now? I see another man's tackle tonight and I'm going to puke. And I got no nice underwear or anythin' - just a pair of big old pants like my gran used to wear. And no wine."

"Wait, wait. These are details, and easily fixed. You must see Finn. If I have to drop you at the door, you will see him. And you will make love with him. Tonight. Is promise?"

"I really don't wanna think about sex for a bit, Helena. You understand that don't you?"

"Okay, so don't have sex. Ask him to show you his little watches, then say you have period. Is easy. Then sleep with him but say no touching. Cuddles only. And I will be surprised, also disappointed, if you make it to dawn without coming to your senses. And failing all else, at least you will find out if he snores. Again this is not an insignificant part of any relationship."

"No, Helena. You don't get it. All I'm going to see for a long time is Squinty's,... big,... thing."

"So get over it. You have no nice underwear? I have some, they are unworn, sadly - from Paris. Ah, the French - reluctantly, I admit they know about such things as ladies undergarments."

"I'm not going to Finn wearing your undies, if you've worn them first or not. Got enough trouble as it is thinking you're shaggin' him anyway - you goin' down to see him - *yes I heard about that*. So no thanks, your underwear's goin' nowhere near Finn Finucane."

Helena smiles, pleased by Hermione's jealousy, but in a playful way. "Hey, listen, I brought him back for you, didn't I? Nothing passed between us - at least nothing of that sort - but the more I know of this man, the more I like him, and if you don't do something about it quick, I change my mind. He will be an easy man to allow myself to be in love with. And I have only to smile at him in that special way,...."

"You're like my mum, telling me to do stuff, and you must know I'm less likely to do it the more you say I should."

Helena shrugs. "So, you don't want him?"

"Didn't say that."

"Yes, you did."

"Well, I didn't mean it."

"So, finally, we have established Hermione wants Finn. So, you go to him. Tonight. How old are you? Surely you know the first time with any man, all that's important is to get it out of the way. Good sex is for later."

"I was only saying that earlier,.. I mean, getting it out of the way."

"Listen, Squinty's thing appears in your imagination as Finn is nearing the crucial moment. So what?"

"I don't know if I can do it, that's all."

"Yes you can. And if you can't, then fake it. But I think five minutes with Finn, and you will forget everything that's happened here today."

Hermione can't believe she's laughing. "I doubt I'm ever going to forget it, Helena. But five minutes with you certainly has me feeling a whole lot better."

"I feel the same with you. Perhaps we are mistaken about men, and

should marry one another instead. I have no first hand knowledge of these matters, but am open to the experience if you are."

Woa! Where did that one come from?

But she's joking, Hermione, so just go with it.

"Well, if things don't work out with Finn I'll let you know. Except I think you'd be the one always wearing the trousers, darlin' and me doing the washing up. So no thanks."

"No, I think you can hold your own with me. You are resilient." Helena casts her a half admiring glance.

Hermione is humbled by it. "You won't say anything about this, will you?"

"About us getting married?"

Hermione gives a patient sigh. "No,... about Squinty."

"Of course not. About what has happened here I will say nothing."

Helena is looking pale tonight, or perhaps it's just the sodium glare from the street lamps as they pass. Always so neat, so perfect, so damned sexy, but,...

"You all right, Helena? You look tired."

"Long way to Aylesbury and back" she says. "Trains broken going there, roads broken coming back. This country, Hermione. How you bear it? You are heading for places I have already been and hoped not to see again. You English, you want kick up arse."

Chapter Forty Eight

Finn waited. It was ten minutes to eight, and for the first time in his life a woman was coming to him. He'd got that right, hadn't he? She was coming? On all previous occasions, it was he who had gone to them, so this marked a dramatic shift in the politics of the situation. Whether it boded well or ill, he wasn't sure. He was simply unfamiliar with the concept of a woman who wanted him enough to make the effort to seek him out. And yes, that was a little unsettling.

Kathleen had wanted him, obviously, once, or they would not have married and raised kids together, but it had been a wanting very much concealed, as if it were considered giving too much away in contractual terms to actually admit it. That Hermione wanted him was plain, because she had unambiguously said so, and meant it, and that made him nervous - the lack of pretence, the sheer pragmatic honesty of it. He was nervous too their relationship was already pointing to the last base of bed and sex, when they'd yet even to hold hands.

It was all going to happen tonight then, in one blinding rush, from nought to everything in ten seconds, and tomorrow they would re-enter the world already as lovers.

He'd tidied the house but, since he'd no stuff, this had taken all of five minutes. So he'd Hoovered the carpets, dusted the tops of the skirtings and the window sills. Then he'd changed the bed, made it up like he knew what he was doing. He'd showered, shaved. He'd emptied his bowels. There were condoms in his wallet, though he'd not yet worked out how to bring that subject up. He'd turned off his phone. There was wine in the fridge. Ditto a light ready-meal for two, purchased from Mackenzies that afternoon, but of the latter he was ashamed on two counts, first that it had come from Mackenzies, and two, given Hermione's prowess in the culinary department the best he could hope was she'd be polite about it.

He was nervous, yes, but nothing was going to get in the way. He was going to do this. Kathleen had moved on ages ago, just not seen fit to tell him about it, so he felt justified in moving on as well, moving on with Hermione. Still, a part of him wished they could skip this bit, consider it a done deal already, fast forward then to the morning after when there would be an understanding between them, and an opening into intimacy.

Why?

Simple: he was afraid of screwing it up.

Should he not have been a little more, dare he say,... lustful? Hermione was, after all, a very attractive woman, and young, if not entirely in years, then at least in spirit, at a time when, in spirit, Finn was feeling very old indeed. Or was it that it had simply been so long he could barely remember what to do, or even what it felt like any more, simply to touch a woman's skin.

At five minutes to eight there came the knock, and with a deep nervous breath, he answered the door.

"Ah, Kyle?"

"Hi Finn. Mum says can you come?"

This was unfortunate timing. Inevitable, he supposed. But what to say?

"So,... what's up?"

"It's the café," said Kyle. "Something's happened. Something bad They're at the cafe, Mum and Hermione, and Anica."

"Everyone okay? What's happened, Kyle?"

"Everyone's okay. It's just a mess. Glass everywhere - like the big window exploded or something. Wondered if you could come help cleaning up."

"Sure."

It was a cold night, bleak, black, spitting a dirty rain flecked with gutteral gobs of sleet. Finn had to pause a moment when they turned the corner of the street onto the promenade. Here the wind took them, tugged at their coats, and the sea roared. The lights of the café were on, but naked somehow, and the pavement was dusted with starry bits of glass that twinkled. The big window had gone. A builder's van blocked the rest of Finn's view, a pair of joiners busying themselves smashing out the loose bits and boarding it all up with ugly sheets of a coarse plywood.

"Mum's inside," said Kyle. "But she can't help much. Her back's playing up."

"Ah,... your mum suffer much with that?"

"More than she tells me. Told her to go see the doctor, but she says they can't do anything. But they must be able to do something, Finn? Wouldn't you think?"

"Not always, Kyle."

"Will you talk to her?"

"Em,..."

"She might listen to you. Tell her to go see the doctor Finn, will you?"

Finn doubted very much Helena would listen to anyone, least of all him, but she might if she knew Kyle was upset about it. "Sure, I'll,... mention it. Okay?"

They had to wait in the street until the joiners said it was safe. Hermione and Helena, and Anica came down from the flat. Hermione didn't look Finn's way but began at once propelling a brush with great vigour, sweeping up the bits of glass. She was like an automaton, over-wound. Helena took to a barstool, looking pale and grave, flicking on her phone. Anica moved the scoop as Hermione swept stuff into it.

The wind blew in, jingling the door chime incessantly. Finn caught it, settled it, tied it up. It all looked incredibly bleak, he thought, and cheerless without the glass. Hermione avoided his eyes for a while longer. Then, as if she'd been building up the courage, she looked up from the broom, looked at him.

"We tried callin'," she said. "But your phone was going straight to answer."

"Thought for a minute you had done another runner," said Helena.

"I,... thought I had a date tonight," he said. "I was avoiding,... interruptions."

Hermione blushed. Helena nodded her understanding, smiled mysteriously. Finn assumed he was forgiven.

There was a rusty lump of iron amid the debris on the floor. It had

cracked the tiles where it had landed, presumably after it had been hurled through the window.

"How can I help?" he asked.

"Need to move the tables away from the window. Then we can get at the glass."

"Okay. Kyle and I can do that."

Kyle nodded his reassurances that he was up for anything - anything to get the Sea View back on its feet, because the Sea View was important. The Sea View was a sweet mug of healing chocolate after a bitter shift at Mackenzies.

"You called the insurance?" asked Finn.

Hermione nodded.

Helena continued to swipe up and down on her 'phone "Now we look for reputable glazing firm," she said.

Finn picked up the lump of iron. It was heavy, circular, the size of a dinner plate. He looked at Hermione, who read his mind and said: "It was an accident, Finn."

Helena nodded, attempted to brainwash him with the power of her gaze. "An accident," she repeated. *You will accept this as the truth.*

So, an accident. How did that one go then? One of them had been outside juggling this lump of iron, they'd slipped perhaps, misjudged their game and sent it through the window. This is what they were expecting him to believe?

And the insurance company?

"Look," he said. "That's going to be an expensive window to replace. The insurance company will be asking questions about it, and even I can tell someone put this window in deliberately. So, regardless of whether we know who it was or not, we need a cop and a crime report number. Otherwise the insurance won't pay."

Finn watched as Hermione and Helena exchanged looks, and their looks spoke of a secret. Hermione nodded. "Finn's right. I need to call

the cops."

"As for who did it," said Finn. "It seems to me there's not many places around here where you can find one of these."

Kyle ran his finger through a sooty smear on the offending item. "What is it Finn?"

"It's an old brake disk. Any garage will have some lying around. Think of a garage around here?"

"Only Mr Mulligans?"

Finn nodded. "But why would Mulligan would want to break the window?"

"Exactly," said Hermione. "Why would he? Maybe someone passing picked it up. Okay, we'll call the cops, but we can't go pointing fingers at anybody."

All murmured their agreement. Finn again observed a meaningful exchange between Hermione and Helena. Squinty Mulligan had been a good customer of the Sea View, and though he didn't particularly like the man he couldn't think why he'd do such a spiteful thing as this. But Finn was in no doubt and the reason was the look in Helena and Hermione's eyes. They knew he'd done it too, and they also knew why.

Hermione sensed Finn knew, knew he was being excluded, sealed off from the secret and she did not like it. But now was not the time for explanations, and men had a funny way of reacting to certain sorts of news.

And Squinty had a gun - also it seems, a bad temper..

Her expression softened. "We'll talk about it later, eh, Finn?"

Okay, later would do, and Finn liked the implication that, in spite of the upset, she still intended them to be alone tonight. But she also intended opening the café in the morning as if nothing had happened. For Hermione the world's axis turned through the Sea View. It wasn't much, but it was everything to her.

He took a breath and turned to face the chaos. There was a lot to do to put things straight.

Chapter Forty Nine

It was after midnight and they were walking by the sea wall. Hermione had drawn close, tucked her arm in his, steadied herself against him. They walked slowly, the wind tried to hurry them, to spill them into the gutter, but after a frantic evening of cleaning up, they had found at last a stillness and a gravity in each other that resisted the world.

Hermione told him the truth, as they walked, or at least a part of it.

"He sort of asked me out," she said.

"Mulligan?"

"It was this afternoon. His timing wasn't great. My fault. He's been flirting with me for months, if flirting's the right word. I should have put him straight before now, put him off - thought I had, but he took no notice. Like water off a duck's back. I was too polite maybe - least that's what Helena says. Tried not to offend him, you know? Look, you won't do anything, will you? And you won't say anything to Kyle either, in case he does something."

"Kyle?"

"I know Kyle's,... fond of me. It would hurt him to think anyone had tried to,.. hurt me. I know what you men are like,... like you have to prove something,... you know? But really, Finn, I can take care of myself."

"So,... you said ‘no’ to Mulligan, and he broke your window?" It must have been quite a rejection, he thought, to make a man do that, or there was something basically wrong with Mulligan. "What did he say, exactly? When you rebuffed him?"

"Well,..." she thought for a while, decided on a little more of the truth. "It's not so much what he said as what he did. Listen, Finn, it's been a long day, and all I've wanted since seeing you and talking to you this afternoon was for us to be alone together."

"What did he do, Hermione? Is there more to this than you're telling me?"

"Oh, don't let this spoil things,... please!"

"It won't spoil anything, but what did he do?"

"Well,... he got his thing out and asked me to touch it."

"His thing?"

"You know,... he got his,... well, his dick out. All right?"

Finn's eyes opened wide. "Seriously?"

She shook her head, weary of it all. "It's a long story, darlin' and really, 'part from you coming back, it's not been a great day. My car's stuck out half way 'tween here and Weston, buggered for all I know, and then Squinty's apparently just passin', like, and offering to help me out, in exchange for certain favours, to which I answer with a half a can of body spray. Then Helena brings me home and he's put the café window in 'cos turns out he's a man-child and can't deal with rejection, or a woman defendin' erself. Least I'm thinkin' it's im what did it 'cos like you I can't think of anyone else."

They paused by the harbour, looked out to sea, but although the sea sounded close, it was lost in darkness. Hermione shivered in her coat, shrank down a little deeper inside of it. Finn felt her shrinking, held her more snugly. She was a strong woman, but softly yielding under his arm, offering him a calculated glimpse of her weakness, her vulnerability.

"So," she said. "What you thinkin'?"

Finn wasn't sure. "I'd no idea he could be like that. I mean, it's obvious now, the way he talks, the way he is, the way he seems, but I'd not expected him to *really* be like that, you know? What sort of man would think doing that might work?"

"Oh, you'd be surprised. Some men are so dim, and so desperate. I don't know. Look, Finn, I stand by everything I said this afternoon, you know? 'bout wantin you, and,... you know 'lovin you and all that. But, this is it for me, you see that don't you? The Sea View Cafe. Carrickbar. The whole sad windblown mess of it. Squinty Mulligan and all. This is where I am now. And they'll be carrying me out that café in a box, 'cos I'm going nowhere else. This is where I draw the line. No one scares me, Finn, so don't go all macho on me and think I need you goin' round Squinty's place and givin him a good hidin', cos I don't. Right?"

"Okay."

"I'm done running. I don't know what I expected out of life, but I've ended up with this seedy café, and the oddest bunch of friends,... and maybe you too, if you'll let me in. I don't know. But this is where I fight my corner, and Squinty can just go,...."

"Fuck himself?"

"Damn right he can."

Finn conceded. He would not do the macho thing. This was a woman who needed no one to fight her corner, and would perhaps even take it as an insult if he did. She was like Helena in that respect, he thought, the pair of them warriors, and remarkable for being so, at least in his experience. But that they didn't need a man to fight for them made him wonder what they did want him for. I mean, they both did seem to want him around. Was it just to fix things up, and move heavy objects?

But wait, Finn, there's something else here. More than anything she's telling you she'll not be leaving Carrickbar, and if you want her, you'll have to stay. She'll be following you nowhere.

"Okay," he said. "But,... you're wrong."

"Wrong?"

"The Sea View's anything but a seedy café. "

"All right. Thanks. I do my best." She turned to him then, pulled him to a halt and looked into his eyes. Hers were firm, emphatic, his tender and enquiring. "Look, Finn, you sure you're up for this?"

What did she mean? Up for what? Was she having second thoughts about sleeping with him?

"I can be bossy," she went on. "A bit potty, and,... well,... dead horny at times,..."

"Sounds great."

"Tryin' to be serious, Finn."

"All right, well,... I can be a bit dull. I spend hours fiddling with little

watches, and I spent my whole working life juggling figures on balance sheets. I'm as substantial as smoke. As for horny, I can't remember. It's only since meeting you I've been reminded of that side of things at all. About the only thing we have in common then is we're both a bit potty. So how about you? Are *you* still up for it?"

She looked away, concealed a smile. "Put it like that, we're not exactly spoiling another couple then are we? But yes, I suppose so. I'm still up for it."

"Well, that's all right then."

"But Finn, why Carrickbar?"

"What do you mean *why?"*

"It's not exactly,... well,... Las Vegas, is it?"

"Not exactly Blackpool either. I told you I once came here as a kid on holiday. I have fond memories of it. Oh, I know it was all a long time ago, and we've had so many downturns since then the whole country's been laid waste, but it's not reality that inspires us, is it? It's our dreams, our memories. But what about you? I mean,... I know why you left Devon, but what brought *you* to Carrickbar?"

"Got lost on the way to Lancaster. Kind of liked the look of it, that's all. But is it not a bit small for you?"

"Okay, you're thinking what? I'm not going to be here for long, that it's not big enough for me? But Min,... I've never felt more alive since coming here."

"Maybe that's 'cos you're just getting your head together, and when it's together properly you'll go back to doin' what you used to do before. You'll go back to Axminster."

"You mean Aylesbury? You mean the life that was making me ill? I don't think so. Look, things are still really complicated with me."

"You mean like you being married and everythin'?"

"Well, that yes. Sort of. I've still got kids and a house down south,... and yes a wife."

"I know you're married Finn. I know it's all a bit complicated."

"Complicated, yes, but in another they're a lot simpler than they were a few months ago. I didn't know this when I first came here, but my wife's been having an affair, probably for years. And I got this crack on the head from a baseball bat because her lover, her boss, mistook me for a burglar in my own home. So yes, that's simplified things a lot. It was like a symbolic rejection. It's not done much for my looks , but it's kind of released me from a whole lot of,..."

"Crap?" Hermione had been wondering when Finn would get around to telling her about his marriage. But had she heard that right: "Your wife's shaggin' her boss? But,... Helena knew. She told me that ages ago."

"Well, I don't see how she could have known."

"Said it was your story. Sometimes we're too close to things, and we trust when perhaps we shouldn't. Oh, I'm sorry Finn, but are you saying you're wanting to stay on in Carrickbar now?"

"Yes, I think I am."

"Why? What's the difference between now and before you went away, went back to Axminster,... I mean Aylesbury?"

"Well,... you, Hermione. And in a different kind of way, Kyle, and Helena, and Lionel, and,... well, Anica too."

"Might have known Helena would be in there somewhere."

"I said in a *different* way."

"Okay. Just sex mad, that's my problem. And insecure. Thinkin' everyone's doing it with everyone else, except me. All I get is Squinty Mulligan."

"Maybe this isn't a good idea right now,..."

"Oh? What's that then?"

"Your coming up to my place."

"You mean, 'cos of Squinty? 'Cos of what he did. Or 'cos I'm jealous of

Helena and more or less certain she'll have the pants off you one day."

"I was meaning more because you must be tired and upset."

She smiled, relieved. "Am a bit." Above all else she did not want Finn to despise her, to think her somehow loose, or weak. But she did want him to know she was still wary of his relationship with Helena, that if Helena ever did have the pants off him she'd be,... what?

What was that, Minnie?

Fuck, confusing!

She was thinking she'd rather like to see it!

No way!

"On the other hand," he said. "I did tidy up especially, I mean, thinking you were coming."

"You did? That's nice."

"And I do have a bottle of wine in the fridge, and something to eat if you want it. So,... why don't you just come up,..."

"Wine? Didn't manage to get any wine. Didn't manage to get any nice undies neither - I,.. I mean *either* - so don't you go expectin' any. And I probably stink. Didn't get a bath neither. Either. Must smell like the griddle."

"You don't smell like the griddle. But anyway,... whatever,.. hot bath then, and sleep. At my place?"

"Sleep? Not be doing much of that tonight, Finn." She gave a snort. "I mean too much running round inside my head tonight to sleep. Like what my customers goin' to think when they roll up to find the shop all boarded up tomorrow."

"I'm sure they won't mind. Just make sure there's a big sign on the pavement that says 'OPEN'. It'll be fine."

The softness of her overwhelmed him now. It was like a heat melting him, and he felt something give, felt a valve open and something come rushing out, swelling his breast. It was such a tender thing,...

"Finn?"

"Sorry, it just feels so,..."

"Cold?"

"No. Hermione, I know you don't *need* a man, that you're perfectly capable of looking after yourself, but,... if in those odd moments when you're feeling like you need someone, well, I'd really like to be that someone."

He was never going to kiss her, she thought. She knew that. Helena was right. This man had been so oppressed by life he had temporarily mislaid his balls, and his confidence was dissolved into a boiling soup of permanent angst. So she reached up, slid a hand around the back of his neck and coaxed him towards her. It was all he needed, that little touch of her hand. And then they kissed. It was a passing brush at first, as if they'd both forgotten how to kiss, as if their last remembered kisses had been goodnight pecks, void of feeling for their being overused. And it took a while for the feeling to be remembered, to melt through, and for the moistness to return.

They found it in the pause, and in the scent of one another. For Hermione especially it was in his scent that she trusted him, and it was in her vulnerability she wanted him more than she was confident she'd be able to reach him, to open him up to her the way she wanted. He was so numb with cold, with life, with the shock of it. And for Finn it was in her unexpected softness, and the possibility that after such a long fall, touching down with her might yet actually be the making of him, that he still had a chance of making something good and simple and straight out of his life,... with her.

"Sleep with me tonight," he said. "And rest. Just rest. With me."

"Ooh,... I like the way you say that. If only Squinty had said it like that this afternoon I might have been a bit more compliant." She laughed. It wasn't funny, and it wasn't over with Squinty, but it felt smaller when she laughed at it. And after kissing Finn it felt like something from another lifetime.

They turned away from the sea, let the wind push them across the road. "What you going to do in Carrickbar anyway, Finn? You're not old enough to just retire here. You got to have somethin'"

"I'm working on it," he said. "I still don't know if I'm handling it right though,... I mean my other life,... my old life."

"Sounds to me like your wife's doin' all the handlin' of it. But don't think about that right now, okay?" And, on a sudden, decisive sigh: "You're with me now, right?"

With me, she was saying, meaning to forsake all other womanly comforts, besides hers. Including, his wife's but perhaps more especially, Helena Aynslea's.

Definitely.

It was not a difficult decision.

"Right," he said.

"So trust me, and I won't let anything bad happen. Trust me and I'll see to it everything works out okay. For all of us. Okay?"

All of us?

Finn let her in to the house on Elm Street and she entered like she'd always lived there, peeling off her coat and tossing it on the hook. Finn laid his coat on top of hers, did it self consciously, wondering as he did it if it was too presumptuous, the laying of his coat on top of hers.

Fuck's sake Finn!

"Em,... I'll get some glasses, " he said,... then, maybe,... we could talk a bit."

She sensed him veering off course; she couldn't risk them talking any more. "Let's skip the wine," she said. "'Bout the only thing keeping me awake right now is the thought it's been a long time since I had a man inside of me. A man I wanted, that is. And you've been a long time without anything at all. So,... who we trying to kid? Come on," she motioned with her eyes to the stairs. "Then we both can fall down dead at last in a heap of sweat, and get some fuckin' sleep."

Chapter Fifty

In the morning the sun shone, but only in Finn's head. It was actually just another grey Carrickbar winter's morning. The sea was flat, a high tide slopping listlessly now against the harbour wall as if exhausted by the night's storm. Finn looked out and saw the wonder in it, and the freshness, and in it also he imagined the sunshine. It felt like the morning after the first time with a girl whose name he could no longer remember, the first time, about a hundred years ago.

He'd forgotten the willing vulnerability of rendering oneself shyly naked to a woman. Hermione had undressed hastily, almost comically, tugging off her underwear and apologising for it's lack of allure, an apology that was neither necessary, nor even registered by Finn, who had been rendered at once spellbound by her extraordinary beauty. Of course a man might find allure in any undressed woman, but Finn found it to a dry mouthed excess in Hermione.

He had forgotten too the stages of that magical first loving and relived them now - the shock of the first feather touch embrace, warm skin on skin, and the impossible smoothness of a woman. Then it was his head dipped gently to her breast, and she holding it there lightly with a nurturing hand upon his cheek, the same hand that then familiarised itself with his sex, and him hardening with an aching pleasure that was alien to him after so long lacking the touch of a woman.

And then it was him finally venturing a familiarity with her secret place, finding her there like a hot quicksand - firm and unyielding, but only for a moment, before opening to a moistness that drew him deep and so sudden, and her hand still playing upon him so he came at once, shot it out like a hair triggered teenager and with a force unknown in years.

"Oh,... Finn! I hope that's not it!"

He laughed, lay back against the bedpost, and her at the opposite corner, dressed only in darkness. A lone car passed and painted her in a slow dynamic of light and shade.

"Give me a moment," he said.

But he didn't want it. Not the moment anyway. What he wanted was the feel of her like a wave beneath him and around him, and him stretched out and surfing so deep inside her it was a painful joy even to breathe. And with each breath he wanted to communicate the depth

of his awe, his joy, his love for this woman. This woman who was Hermione Watts.

But what he got when he came near was her manoeuvring herself deftly atop and coming then slowly to a serene revelation, eyes open and dreamy, lips parted, and a brief smile illuminating them when he came once more inside of her.

It was by now one a.m.

"Not bad first time, Finn Finucane," she said, then passed out face down upon the pillow beside him and snored.

And now, already, it was the morning after and he was watching the sea, feeling golden floaty in the aftermath and savouring it because such moments as this in a man's life were rare.

She was running, Hermione and Anica. She had been letting herself out quietly, her clothes held in a bundle to her bosom, and when he'd looked up, disappointed to find her going, she'd kissed him, said she'd see him in the cafe, later. They would open on time, and Finn would call, at ten, and then he would look into her eyes and see if she still meant everything she had said, and if everything they had shared was still real, and still meant what he thought it meant.

For now though he contemplated the only cloud on the horizon, so to speak,.... the garage across the street.

He could see three old rusted brake disks stacked up by the petrol pump. Such things would normally come in twos or fours, he reasoned - so one was missing, the one that had presumably gone through Hermione's window. He would have investigated further but the dog was growling, bare teeth, strings of saliva hanging.

Filthy.

Stinking.

It didn't matter. It was circumstantial evidence at best, and what could he do anyway with Hermione not wanting to take things any further? Still, it unsettled him; it had been a violent, and vindictive act. It was easy to avoid such people in the seething mass of a big town or a city. They kept to their alleyways, their creeping cracks, their particular watering holes. But here one had only to look down the promenade to

be reminded of a sinister presence.

Squinty Mulligan.

Bastard!

Would he have assaulted Hermione, had she not been so handy with her spray-can? Might he be capable of assaulting someone else? What thoughts does he think when he looks at Hermione, or Helena,... or Anica?

Don't go there Finn.

What thoughts do you think?

The buzz of an outboard motor came rising sudden from the harbour, cutting like a chainsaw through the peace of the morning, and a boat carved a creamy wake as it headed out to sea. Finn recognised Mulligan at the tiller, Mulligan scanning the shore with binoculars, scanning Finn.

A dirty old van came down the hill, parked by the harbour wall. A guy in jogs and a hoodie-top climbed down and jogged off in the direction of the marsh. Gulls screeched and wheeled, and a cold wind blew. Finn realised his sunshine of the mind had been eclipsed now by the shadow of something dirty, something dangerous.

He arrived early at the Sea View. Anica greeted him with a wide smile and dimples, but Hermione wasn't there and Finn was too shy to ask where she was. Instead, he found Lionel sitting with the only remaining sea view, and joined him there for coffee. The cafe was irredeemably gloomy with the main window now gone and boarded up. Anica was thinking they might paint it white. Finn agreed it would be a good idea and offered his services as painter and decorator.

She was a bright girl, he thought, full of good ideas, and always positive about life, when she had little reason to be so.

For want of an opener, Finn asked Lionel about the old campsite.

Lionel recalled it was Squinty Mulligan's father who had owned it, that it had fallen to Squinty, who had sat on it for decades, most likely with a view to one day obtaining planning permission for houses. But Lionel knew someone on the planning committee who had told him such

permission would never be granted, that the one thing Carrickbar was not short of was houses, that what it was short of was people, and reasons for them to stay.

Mulligan would be waiting a long time.

Mulligan! That name again.

The news Mulligan owned the campsite was disappointing. It meant there could be no negotiation, and Finn's plan was in ruins before it had got off the drawing board - not that he'd been wholly serious about it anyway - or so he told himself. But Lionel's interest was piqued now so Finn took out his phone and showed him a brochure online for a camp-site in the Lake District - funky looking camping pods, and teepees all tastefully arrayed and impossibly attractive people with white toothed smiles sitting around, sipping wine and munching dressed salads.

Lionel was intrigued. "Camping pods?"

"The pleasure of the outdoors," explained Finn, "But without the inconvenience of having to lug your own tent about. They call it glamping. It's all the rage now, apparently."

Lionel nodded in approval. "Half way between a tent and a cabin," he said. "This is camping with champagne and canapes. I get it."

Anica brought Finn his coffee and lingered. "Oh, they are so cute," she said. "I wish to apply for job as your site warden. Pod cleaner. Booker in. Greeter. Anything. They look so dreamy. And when one is free, I shall sleep in it myself and believe myself a Hobbit."

"Em,... seriously?"

"For sure seriously."

"I thought you had a job here."

"Hermione cannot not pay me yet, and I cannot remain in UK without work, otherwise I am tourist and will have to go home. At least I think this is how it will be when UK is leaving EU. No one seems to be able to tell me, if I will need visa or no. But I have ambition. And I understand is not personal. I still love you. UK is not bastards who stole my luggage. It is you and Lionel, and Hermione. I will do a good

job for you."

Finn had already calculated he'd need help, but it was pointless thinking it through any further. The plan was in ruins because Mulligan owned the site, and Mulligan was a sleazy, dirty old man better held at arm's length.

"It's a good location up there," said Lionel. "Has all the necessary facilities. No power now of course, but maybe you could rig up something solar,.. you know,... cash in on that eco-vibe as well. Zero carbon footprint glamping."

But Finn had lost interest. "We're dreaming, Lionel."

"Your dream, Finn. And good one. Worth having a chat with Mulligan, I'd say. But you'll need to watch him. He's a shameless old rogue."

Finn and Anica exchanged glances.

Lionel thought about it some more. "Can't run a campsite from Aylesbury though. Are you planning on becoming a native?"

"Maybe."

Lionel looked glum of a sudden. "It's risky of course. We get so few visitors here now. And there's no guarantee Hermione's biker chaps aren't simply a flash in the pan, that they won't get bored and stop coming."

"Nowhere for them to stay, Lionel. If they had somewhere to stay, more might come. And tourists too. The North is very popular with European tourists right now. Much cheaper than prices down south. And what with the pound collapsing against the Euro and all that,..." Finn caught himself. It sounded like he was trying to convince himself.

"Funny, but I don't see Carrickbar as a tourist destination any more. Perhaps in the sixties? But now?"

Lionel was asking Finn?

Well come on then. What has it got?

"There's a decent beach. Looking better too now Kyle has started cleaning it up. I think there's going to be a renaissance of the stay at

home holiday in Britain - consequence of people's fear of getting blown up or kidnapped and their heads cut off abroad. And there's something - I don't know - authentic about this place. People like that sort of thing."

Lionel was puzzled. "Authentic?"

"It doesn't pretend to be anything other than what it is."

"You mean old and knackered?"

"Beach, sea air, fine sunsets. These are timeless things, Lionel. These are the only certainties. Everything else has fallen away."

"Rain, and a regular stiff easterly. These are also the certainties in Carrickbar."

"Now you're just being provocative. But dammit when everything else is proving itself to be a sham, it's the basics we need to turn to. Brush the muck off the foundations, and build again."

He was,... he was trying to talk himself into it. Or was this more than the campsite he was thinking of now? Was this more existential? Was this concerning his own presence in Carrickbar?

Anica drew up a chair. She knew Finn had been hurt in his private life. She understood him, warmed to his sentiment, something poetic in it. She understood too why they could not approach Mulligan, and there was disappointment in that. It was only a little dream, but such as it was, it buoyed her. And Finn realised it had buoyed him too.

"You will also need someone to mow," she said. "And keep the grounds looking nice and smelling all year of sweet grass. Someone like Kyle, perhaps? Kyle lives very close to the campsite. You will buy a little tractor mower for him, and Kyle and I will manage this for you."

"Really?"

Already he was on his way to becoming a minimum wage-slaver with a pair of naive youngsters to exploit.

"I'm not sure how much I could pay,... I've not thought that far yet."

"For sure you will not pay us very much to start. Whether we mind that

determines how long we will work for you of course." She smiled, teasing. "But that's okay so long as the dream is ours also."

Lionel nodded, finally convinced. "It's a good plan, Finn. Something positive for a change. You should do it. Have a chat with Mulligan."

Sure, thought Finn.

A chat with Mulligan.

Chapter Fifty One

Hermione waits with Helena in the Volvo. They are in the lay-by, next to the Ka on the road to Weston. The RAC is on its way.

"So," says Helena. "How was it?"

Hermione has known this was coming since Helena picked her up from the cafe that morning. She has known it from the look in her eye and the barely concealed smile. And she wonders why it is they can spend no more than a few minutes in each other's company without discussing men, or in fact one man in particular: Finn.

Helena is obviously still curious about him. So,.. Hermione is determined she will not blush in the telling of it, and wonders how much of it is safe to share. "It was sweet," she says. "And funny."

"Funny? Are you sure you were doing it right? In my life I have never found it funny."

Hermione confirms with a nod, smiling now. "Sweet and funny, and lovely. You were right. Five minutes with Finn and I forgot everything else that happened yesterday."

"Now I am jealous I did not have him while we were away together. I would like to try this funny love-making for a change. In my experience it is all huffing and puffing."

"You could have had him any time. Sounds like you get on well enough."

Helena arches a brow defensively. "So?"

"So why didn't you?"

"I have already told you. It would be a waste of time. Mine and his."

"This 'running out of life' thing you told me about?"

"Maybe."

"Seems to me though if that was true you'd want to grab it with both hands, Helena, before it's too late."

"Grab what with both hands? Finn?"

"Finn. Or anyone. Someone."

Helena sighs wistfully. "Yes, I have been thinking about this, and it makes sense now. I have made a mistake in encouraging this relationship between you."

"I knew it. Want him yourself now? Well, too late."

"No. I'm thinking it is you I want. Will you marry me, Hermione? It is unconventional, yes, but I have done my researches and it is perfectly legal now in UK for women to marry each other, you know? And very practical also."

Helena is drunk again while stone cold sober, speaking her mind without thought for reality or consequence. Hermione shakes her head, bemused. "Just one small problem with that darlin'. We'd have to be a couple of dykes, and so far as I know neither of us are."

"Oh? I'm sure it is not necessary. Who says this is necessary? Listen, it's very simple; you are decent person, and you can make me decent also. I love you. I accept your attachment to Finn of course, and include him as part of the deal - you may keep him. And he will be handy for fixing things around the house. My house is plenty big enough for the three of us. I will borrow him occasionally of course, when I am bored and you are not looking. But I assure you I will never embarrass you in this respect. The secret of a successful three-way is plausible deniability. So,.. when can you move in?"

Cautious now. Helena sounds almost serious. "I think,... Finn might find that a bit confusing, Helena. Thanks all the same. But I'll be sure to mention it to him, see what he says."

"Yes, please mention it. I'm sure Finn will have no difficulty. Men always find the idea of two women exciting."

"In a porn flick maybe, but honestly, Helena, in real life it'd just freak them out. Freak me out too if I didn't know you were joking. Most men can't handle one woman properly. As for two,... well,.. "

Helena smiles. "I notice you did not say no to my proposal."

"Hmm,... Like I said, darlin', I'll think about it. But it seems to me I've

been here before, waitin' in a car and someone coming on to me. I'd no idea I was so desirable. You'll be hitching your skirt up next, and sayin',... lemme see,... how did he put it? *'Don't want sex or nuffink - 'just touch it,... like'*."

Helena pulls a disapproving face. "It is not so appealing, the way you say it. Also, to be compared with Mulligan as a lecturing slob, is very sobering. I apologise of course for sexual abuse, and beg you to spare me the body-spray in my eyes. When are you next seeing Finn?"

She laughs. It's cute, this flirting with Helena. Neither mean it of course. It's just a kind of fencing. "Tonight, I hope," she says. "You know how it is - can't get enough in the beginning. And it's lecherous, by the way. Lecherous slob,... or slut, in your case."

Helena laughs too, blushes, feels a stab in her back, turns pale lipped of a sudden. She tries to hide it but Hermione is lightning-quick to notice the pain of others.

"Helena?"

"Is nothing. My back is still troubling this morning. Is intermittent problem."

"This is more than a bit of back trouble. You've gone all sweaty."

"How charming of me. Is nothing, really. You know how it is once we get to our age?"

"Yes, sciatica and such. And menopause, but that's not it. Helena, tell me. Can't be gettin' married if we're not honest wiv each other, now can we?"

But Helena will not say. She has already told it to Finn, and regretted it as a secret shared, because he cannot possibly understand her side of it. So it's a relief to her, the RAC van as it swings into the lay-by. The man steps down, purposeful, smiling.

"Your rescuer has arrived, Hermione. Not bad. He could,.. service me any time."

Squinty was right about the coil, but the RAC man doesn't have one, so it'll be a tow to the garage in Weston, and a couple of hundred quid to fix because mechanics pay themselves as much as private practice

doctors. Hermione does not want to ride with it, will ride back to Carrickbar with Helena, because Helena is sick, and she'll telephone the garage later.

Fucking car.

"You okay to drive, Helena?"

"Sure, I'm okay."

"I'll drive if you want."

"Honestly, it's just a passing twinge."

But Hermione has already been twenty minutes in the cold with the RAC man, and Helena is still in pain, still sweating and turning shivery now. "Passing slow, don't you think?"

"All right. You drive, please."

"Move over then."

Hermione reads the tightness in Helena's expression as betraying the depth and sharpness of the pain, wonders about asking if she's seen the doctor, thinks twice, holds her tongue, drives. Not much doctors can do about a bad back anyway. Paracetamol and bed rest is about all the doc will say. Except there's more to it. She knows there is.

The car is four times the size of anything she's used to. She can't judge the front or the back of it. And that's Helena all over.

Helena is nervous of the quiet between them now, nervous in case it should precipitate Hermione into asking more about the source of her pain, because then she might have to admit to it, and from there face a lot of other things, like the possibility it's getting worse, and the alternative of risking a life in a wheelchair, her body numb from the waist down, cold pussy and all.

She licks her dry lips.

Anything but that!

One more orgasm is all she asks - one that was not brought about by her own hand. Might she ask Hermione? Could friends actually do

such a thing?

No,... scrub that, Helena.

Stupid, stupid!

Instead, she asks: "You think Kyle was strange last night?"

Hermione is puzzled, thinks back to last night. What happened last night? Oh, the window and cleaning up and all that. "Kyle? No. He was a love. He and Finn worked so hard. What you mean strange?"

"I mean around Anica."

Hermione laughs. "You think he fancies her or something?"

Helena nods. "Is obvious to me. And she was encouraging it."

"No."

"She blushed. I saw. And you were too busy cleaning up to notice."

"Well, if she blushed it's more maybe that she likes him too, and can't help it. She's not said anything, Helena, honestly. Oh, that's sweet. Anica and Kyle. Don't you think that's sweet?... No, wait,.. you don't, do you."

"It is not sweet. It is dangerous and you will discourage it, please. You will tell her of Kyle's disability."

"His *disability*? Hope you don't mind my sayin' Helena, and I know you're 'is mum and likely can't help it, but I think you make too much of that. And Anica can see for herself the way he is. And the way he is - actually - is charming and good natured."

Helena bites her lip, is embarrassed by her blouse which is soaked through now. "You will discourage her please. I would not like to have to cut off her ears while she sleeps. See how attractive she looks then."

"Helena! Really!"

Helena's face is set. Serious. All she has is Kyle. She is bound to lose him one day but that day is not yet, and must be resisted.

"All right, I'll sound her out,... that's all. But gently. And promise me you won't go upsetting her. She's vulnerable. I'd tell her how scary you are, 'cept I think she already knows. And anyone who'd put up with you as a mother in law must really be in love."

Helena lays back, nods. "I have nothing personal against her. She is a nice girl, brave girl of course. I see myself in her. But,... thank you."

"There's no like,... awkwardness between you Georgians and Romanians is there?"

"Not that I can recall." She slides her hand over to Hermione's thigh, rests it there for the remainder of the journey, closes her eyes, tries to imagine Finn in the act of lovemaking, tries to imagine Hermione - finds it surprisingly easy. Yes, she can imagine how sex with him might be funny. To laugh whilst being made love to? Now there's a thought. And the thought too of Hermione laying a quiet hand on her skin, calming, healing,.. laughing.

Helena's hand feels right to Hermione, and she does not mind it there. It feels like Helena is seeking both comfort and a holding on to something warm and real, and Hermione does not mind that she chooses her. Hermione wants to hold her, tell her everything will be all right, to heal her because that's what Hermione does. Except she's not sure she can this time. It's also disconcerting to see the vulnerable side of a person she had up until now seen as a tetchy tigress with inappropriate airs and no knickers. Which just goes to show, you never really know people at all, do you?

"You should go to bed when you get in," she says.

Helena rolls her eyes suggestively, purrs. Hermione looks away, laughs, slaps Hermione's arm with the back of her hand. "For the last time I don't do girls, and neither do you, so shut up you filthy slut. It's not funny."

"How do you know I don't do girls?"

"Well have you? Ever?"

"I say nothing. You are making up your own stories. Except, I will die for one more orgasm that is not self inflicted, and I don't care by whose hand I get it, boy or girl."

"You mean induced - self induced. Inflicted is something bad, like pain. We inflict pain."

"Yes,... I am correct in this, for what is not painful about a self inflicted orgasm?"

"Well, by the look of you, you're in no fit state for anything, self inflicted or not. I'll drop you off at home, but I'm coming round after the cafe closes, okay? And if you're no better I'm ringing the doctor."

"I will see no doctor. And in our marriage remember you are the one who washes up. I wear the trousers."

"Yea well, fuck that you bossy cow. I 'ain't being no one's,... bottom, or whatever they call it. So I'll get Finn to come with me as chaperone, and 'tween us we'll *make* you see the doctor."

"Pfft. As if I am afraid of Finn, this man who makes women laugh while making love to them. What kind of man is that?"

"Didn't say you were afraid of him. Just thought you might respect him that's all."

Helena pauses, nods. "Good point. It is true. I do respect Finn. But I am still seeing no doctor. They are,... fucking useless." And then, smiling: "You would like me more if I washed up for you? If I became,... your bottom? I have never given my bottom to anyone. I am too proud for this, but to you, I would give it. Because I think you would be gentle with it."

Hermione is overwhelmed. She knows they are not talking of sex now. They are talking of something deeper. Helena is suggesting she could be submissive, to Hermione, that she trusts and respects her as much as that.

"Well, I like you fine as you are, Helena. Top and bottom, you posh foreign tart. Just not enough to marry you, all right? Listen, are you on any strong medication right now? 'Cos that might explain you sounding like you're off your head on something."

"Just some pain-killers. They do affect me strangely. I'm sorry if my mouth runs off with me."

"Should you even be driving when you're taking those things?"

"I am not driving. You are driving."

"Helena! You're crazy."

Helena thinks about this: "For sure I am, yes. But in a good way, you think?"

Hermione thinks on this in return, and concedes: "Sure, in a good way. Used to scare the crap out of me, you did. But now I think I'm gettin' the measure of you."

"Oh? The measure? And what do you see?"

"Dunno. But I love you, you daft cow, and I'm glad we're friends now."

Chapter Fifty Two

Squinty sailed due west. It was a cold morning but the sea was flat, hardly any swell, and he made good speed. Perhaps they'd think he was out to make another pick-up. Maybe they'd even have the balls to stop and search him when he came back to harbour. He almost hoped they'd try, because all they'd find was his fishing tackle and a couple of whiting, and him with an expression innocent as a lamb, bleating police harassment. Then maybe they'd run out of money for that surveillance van and move on to some other job. And finally, whatever shady shade was watching the cops, watching him, would let him know it was safe to pass on the stuff at last.

The stuff.

Sure, he'd be glad to get rid of it because its presence was making him jumpy - otherwise he wouldn't have thrown that old brake disc through Hermione's window.

Bitch.

He'd seen the cops turn up when she'd called them last night - too many cops in Carrickbar these days. He supposed it was just for the crime report number and the insurance, but still, he was lucky she'd not told them about him whipping his tackle out. Clearly she'd not said anything or they'd've been knocking on his door that morning and he'd've been calling her a lying cow who'd led him on and lost her nerve at the last minute.

But he agreed he'd either been stupid or desperate or both to pull a stunt like that – I mean the whipping it out bit. It had all happened so quickly, seeing her in the supermarket, and then her breaking down as he'd followed her home. And it wasn't like he hadn't done it before, and with a girl he'd not known nearly half as well as Hermione, took her up over the moors, whipped it out, sudden, like, and she'd deep-throated him without so much as a peep, like she was hungry for it. So you never could tell with women, but he agreed he shouldn't have tried it with Hermione, who perhaps considered herself a cut above that sort of thing.

He was irritated too by the fact that Fancy Pants Finucane was back - Mr lah-di-dah Americano. He'd spied him leaning there non the rail, looking out from the harbour wall that morning, all nonchalant like he owned the place, *fucking incomer*. It was obvious she was keen on

him, but couldn't see how a man like that wouldn't look twice at her - him all high and mighty with his poncy southern accent, and her talking like English was her second language.

She always was above herself. But then Hermione, he reminded himself was another incomer. Carrickbar was overrun with them of a sudden, and he didn't understand it.

If Finucane was after anything, it was just a quick shag, then he'd move on. He'd be better off with that scary Russian cow - all elegance and manners, but a mouth like a sewer. Sure, she was more his type and even if she wasn't she could probably act the part. Hermione was more Squinty's natural property, and Fincuane had no right sniffing around her.

But yes, that thing in the car, and the broken window, that had been stupid, and all on account of the stuff he couldn't shift and was probably threatening to send him down. What might he get, he wondered? Five years? Ten? And was it true what they said in prison, you were likely to be buggered by big hairy cons who weren't even queer?

He shuddered. Anything but that!

Smelled nice though, that spray she'd used on him, smelled like her. He could still smell it a bit now.

Apologise, Squinty. She's a soft heart and will probably forgive you.

As for the other pressing business, maybe the cops would search his place while he was out. Could they do that? Didn't see why not. Cops could do anything they liked these days. It was a risk of course, but he was confident they'd not find the stuff. And even if they'd half a clue as to where it was, they'd need a JCB to get at it. Shame in a way, the taxes he paid, and the cops hadn't enough money or the nous to catch up even with doddery old farts like him. Couldn't even link the drowned girl to the gangs cockling on the marsh when it was bleedin' obvious.

'So what is it you want from life then, Squinty? I mean, here you are, back in your scruffs, bobbing about in your little boat, smelling of Mum and fish and weed. Hadn't it felt good for a while to be washed and shaved and wearing nice threads?'

'Well sure it had.'

Squinty dropped the sail, read the sea, readied his gear. Something was blowing in, something a bit fresher than forecast, but he reckoned he had an hour, then time to make a clean run ahead of it, back to harbour. He was still in sight of land, just about, and the binoculars revealed the clean white building that was the Sea View Cafe, next to the more authoritarian grey of the old customs house.

Clean girl, hot in bed, someone to dress up for. That's what Squinty wanted - not like Maureen down the pub who was a bit of an animal to be honest, and not that clean either.

So you get the girl, and then what?

Well, he'd flatten the garage - stupid idea, selling second hand cars anyway. I mean who'd buy a second hand car off him? Yea, flatten it. Repair business was gone, and no one had ever made a bean selling petrol. And it wasn't like he needed to make a living doing anything now.

So,... build a nice house on it, one of them German Huff Houses like he'd seen on TV - all clean lines and glass and nicely treated wood - view of the harbour and the sea, wall to wall TV, science fiction kitchen, integral garage, big, fat BMW on the drive,... live the dream of the consumer society. And go one further, 'cos you can: proper ocean going yacht in the harbour - *no seriously.* You never knew when you might need to make a run for it - to Ireland, say.

Maybe when the UK split from Europe the cops would be even more dysfunctional and he could disappear for ever. He could call her the Alice - *the boat* - after his mum, and in the mean time the girl could clean the house, be like a wife, cute little pussy on tap, and a skivvy all in one.

'Girl, Squinty? Back up a bit there. What girl?'

Squinty backed up a bit.

'Are we talking about Hermione, here?

He laughed. "Nah, who needs her when I can just go buy me a woman."

But think about it, Squinty: nice house, nice car, nice yacht, nice

threads, nice clean woman on your arm. Maybe Hermione would realise her mistake, that she'd misjudged you. Maybe she'd reconsider if you tried it on again.

By noon he was up to three whiting, two put back on account of their size. There'd also been a speculative pass by a coastguard cutter to which Squinty had given the finger. Maybe they were worried he was going to try a run for it - all the way to Dublin, or Belfast, maybe in a little open boat, all on his own.

Yea, right.

Pillocks!

Hermione! She was a feisty one. Might be worth a bit of jail time just to show her who's the boss, like. All that stuff about the house, the car, the yacht,.. maybe it was worth thinking about some more, but in the mean time, all he needed was a nice little housekeeper who knew her place and did exactly what she was told. Young, docile, peachy arse and big, pointy tits.

Yea!

And what’s more he’d a good idea just where to find one,

Chapter Fifty Three

Finn is seated in the café. Hermione brings his lunch, leans her thigh against his shoulder with all the weight and familiarity of a lover, runs a finger across his back, settles her palm between his blades to feel the heat there. Tonight will be better, she's thinking; it'll be slower, and it'll last longer.

It'll last all night!

But for now: "Finn, darlin'?"

"Hmm?"

"Do somethin' for me?"

"Sure, anything."

"Nip up and see Helena will you? I'm worried."

"What?"

She feels him stiffen under her palm. *Ooh, now that's interesting!* So, there's definitely something going on there - if not in Helena's imagination, then in his.

"Finn?"

"Em,... Okay. Is there a problem?"

"She was in a lot of pain this morning. I think she's ill, but she's not saying. Do you know anything about what's wrong with her?"

Still defensive: "Em,.."

Of course he knows. She can sense it. "She's told you something hasn't she? Wouldn't say a word to me."

"She made me promise."

But even as he says it Finn's thinking how can they have secrets from each other and still be lovers? Helena has a way of getting inbetween stuff complicating everything.

"Don't tell me," she says. "She threatened to cut your balls off if you told anyone."

Finn nods. "I don't think even Kyle knows."

"And if I threaten to cut 'em off as well?"

"That wouldn't be fair, Min."

No, it wouldn't be fair, but it still would serve him right. I mean, he was her man now, wasn't he? How many times had she to sleep with him before he accepted that? She would have it out of him, this secret between him and Helena - if not now, then on the pillow tonight, after she'd shagged his brains out. Nothing like a bit of post coital delirium for loosening a man's tongue, Min. Eh?

And she wanted to know, dammit!

"Okay, so tell me this instead: Do we need to be worried? Is it going to kill her?"

Finn looks out to sea, thinks for some reason about Squinty Mulligan, tossed about on the cold greyness of it in a flimsy little boat. Helena? What's she to him? Why does he feel so honour bound to protect her? Is he compensating for the fact he has failed in his duty as a husband and a father elsewhere?

Ooh,.. that's a new one Finn!

Then he's thinking of the dead girl, Anica's sister, driven by a tide of global economic ruin that had her eking out an existence on the wrong side of what was dignified or even safe, grubbing in the mud of a lethal foreign shore so rich twats could eat and coo pretentiously in fancy London restaurants, and every one of them butt naked in their Emperor's new clothing. And there's him safe all those years in his office, and his banal meetings, and with his bullshit spreadsheets always pointing to the eternal "less", a less that had fed the system, fed the obfuscating bullshit that had led to her drowning.

Okay, Finn!

Get a grip!

Hermione sits down, focuses him by taking his arm. "Finn, darlin'?

What's the matter?"

"Hmm? Sorry,..."

"You're drifting' away. What is it?"

"I was just thinking,..."

He still wasn't well. She feels the tremor in him, presses on gently: "Listen, love, we're all orphans here, you know? We make our own family now, which is better in a way, 'cos then we get to choose who's in and who's out. And Helena's in, 'cos we love her, right?"

Did she say Love?

All right, yes, he loved her. He definitely loved Helena in some strange, indefinable, possibly spiritual, probably still even a sexual way. You could not save the whole world, and it was foolish to try, but you should always try to save the ones you loved, and if everyone loved enough, then the whole world would be all right.

Wouldn't it?

She feels him drifting again, tugs him back into focus. "Finn, darlin'?"

Best to confess: "She struggles with back-pain," he says. Deep breath. "She carries the fragment of a bullet, from,... before,... you know? From her time in Georgia. It smashed a kidney. They took out what they could, but some of it's still lodged deep, near her spine."

"But that's over twenty years ago. You're telling me she's been like this since then?"

"It's been getting worse I think."

"Can't nothin' be done?"

"She says not. She says the treatment might kill her, or she might be paralysed. Safer to do nothing for now, until it gets worse. But I don't know. Treatments for all sorts of things have moved on a lot in twenty years - except I think she's afraid, you know? And who wouldn't be?"

"She dint look good this morning. Don't know how much worse it needs to be. I said I'd call on her, but I'm leaving Anica alone here too much,

and it's not fair. I said I'd go when the café closes, but that seems a long time. Would you go? Let me know she's okay. Please? Oh, God. A bullet?"

Finn reads the distress in her, surprised by the sudden closeness between her and Helena. He'd always thought there'd been an irreconcilable tension between them, a coldness, Hermione even calling her cruel names. Still, it pleases him they've reached an understanding, become friends, because Helena needs all the friends she can get.

And Hermione is a healer.

"Okay," he says. "But please, spare my balls and don't let on I've told you. Also, if she has her way with me while I'm up there, it's not my fault. You know what's she's like. And you're probably right - I'd be too polite to say no."

"Well, last I saw of her, she didn't look up to much, Finn. And anyway I think she's gone a bit Lesbian on us, so you'll be okay. It's me has to worry now."

"Helena? Lesbian?" *Had he missed that one?*

"Long story, Finn. And I'm still not sure she was havin' me on, but if you'd go check on her all the same I'd feel a lot better."

Chapter Fifty Four

The west had begun to darken by early afternoon, and the sea raced in with little white breakers. Finn thought it disturbing how it could change so quickly. He wondered if Squinty had made it back, wondered if he was a good seaman, and if such a skill as that, an affinity with the sea, was not the beginning at least of a redeeming feature in him, that he could not be so hopelessly lost as all that - this the man who had exposed himself to Finn's lover, the man who had thought it normal to request sexual favours of a woman in return for his protection.

'I hope he drowns.'

Bastard.

'No you don't Finn.'

Tides,... the tides in Carrickbar were shifting and treacherous. And you never knew where you stood with them.

Helena?

Helena was ill. And Lesbian?

What?

A knock brought Kyle to the door, his face tight with a worry he'd been carrying since the day before.

"Mum okay, Kyle? Hermione asked if I'd check."

Kyle's words were stuck somehow. He took a breath to release them, then they came out blunt, to the point: "Mum needs a doctor, Finn. She needs one right now."

"And she won't see one?" Finn had known it would come to this. He'd just not expected it so soon. "Shall I speak to her?"

Kyle nodded, led Finn upstairs, opened the door on Helena's room. She was in bed, pale, lips white and dry-cracked, the sweat soaking her nightdress. There was a sweet odour to the room that alarmed him, memories of past sick chambers, periods of his life that had ended badly.

She feigned brightness. "Finn! So, finally I get you in my bedroom. How typical of you with your bad timing though. I am feeling a little,... indisposed today."

He pulled up a chair, sat, ventured a hand to her brow. It was hot and wet, her hair sticking to it. He ventured to loosen it from her eyes. She was passive, like a Victorian heroine come down with a dangerous fever, yet somehow remaining stately and serene in her distress.

But then: "What?" she said. "You are fucking doctor now? You told me you were bean counter."

Her temperature alarmed him. "Is this normal for you?"

"Normal? What is normal please? Does this look normal?" She coughed, then winced as the spasm travelled to her back and a wave of white hot pain washed lazily up her spine.

"You've not had as bad a turn as this before?"

Finn had no idea what to do. Kyle was standing at Finn's shoulder, fists thrust deep in his pockets to hide the tension as he balled and unballed them. "Mum fainted earlier," he said.

"Kyle! For small boy you have big mouth!"

"How long were you out?" said Finn.

"A moment. It was nothing."

"Let's call the doctor, Mum."

"I'll be fine, darling. Finn it is lovely to see you. We shall take tea? Downstairs. Please give me a little time to dress."

"Helena, I suspect you're in more pain right now than most of us could bear even for a moment. It's also obvious you have a fever, an infection,... something,..."

Helena went on as if she'd not heard. "I would have dressed better for you," she said. "But I did not know you were coming. It is very generous of Hermione to lend you to me this way. Don't worry, it is all arranged. We talked about it only this morning. She and I are to be married, Finn. I'm sure you agree it is the most practical arrangement

under the circumstances."

Delirium?

It was hard to tell with Helena, for there were times when even normal conversations with her bordered on the dream-like, such was the fast eddied stream of her consciousness, sucking and jolting this way and that. Finn stood, suddenly resolved, and made for the door. Helena called him back, sober now, a small voice crying out from behind the glamour of her elaborate disguise.

"I can't, Finn. I can't do this!" Her first admission she was afraid. "I mean,... not on my own."

"Your husband?... we should let him know."

"Husband? Fuck husband. You crazy? Who is he to me? You are my husband now. I trust you to do what is right for me. And right now, yes, I want this pain to stop."

"You say you trust me?"

"God help me,.. yes. I trust you. Of course I fucking trust you."

She was shouting at him, and the effort of it exhausted her. She flopped back on the pillow and lay there, her breast rising and falling with short, panting breaths.

Finn stepped out of the room, then rang Carina for advice. When he came back he was thoughtful, knelt by the bed, took her hand and kissed it. He wasn't sure about the kiss but did it anyway. This was Helena after all, nothing being what it seemed. Let her wonder about the kiss. She'd had them confused and guessing often enough.

"Had a date, tonight," he said. "Looks like I'll be spending it with you instead. But you're right, I'm sure Hermione will understand."

"Oh?"

"Ambulance is on its way."

Helena lay back against the pillow, fists clenched, then let out a breath, relaxed, resigned to it now. "You will look after Kyle for me?"

"Kyle will be fine."

"And keep that bitch Anica away from him."

They had both forgotten Kyle was still there.

"Mum!"

"Sorry Kyle, but she is no good for you. She is,... hard as nails, and bossy britches."

Like you're not, thought Finn.

Helena had already recognised in Anica a younger version of herself, understood that at some point Kyle would need another mother, but was not yet ready to relinquish her role. Finn saw this in a flash, wondered where it had come from. He raised a hand to call time. "Let's not argue about this now, eh?"

Chapter Fifty Five

They had closed the casualty department at Weston, which meant an hour's drive with blues and twos to a bigger, similarly overpressed hospital, and a four hour wait for A+E triage. It was increasingly common for casualties to be dead on arrival. Finn was familiar enough with the national statistics, and did not want Helena to become one of them. She made it, and now lay on a gurney in a pale green corridor, surrounded by the coughing and the effing and the blinding, and the mildly bleeding of the greater region's walking wounded.

Kyle had ridden with her, Finn followed on with Hermione in the car. They found him now looking startled and nervy. He was unused to hospitals, and the shock of an ailing humanity had disorientated him. He was wide eyed and reeling, Helena barely conscious, barely recognisable, somehow shrunken under a fogged up oxygen mask. The journey had exhausted her and Finn was alarmed at the deterioration. There were no cubicles vacant, no privacy, and the one redeeming fact of her unconsciousness he thought was that it protected her from the loss of dignity which would otherwise have been appalling to her.

Helena must have her dignity.

This was important to all who knew her.

Meanwhile, a motorway pile-up and some gravely wounded casualties had overstretched the A+E team. Helena's condition was serious, but she had been categorised as not in immediate danger of death, so had to wait. Finn took up a protective position at her head, nerves stretched, arms folded like a warring centurion.

Hermione folded Kyle into an embrace.

Finn was thinking darkly, and not altogether rationally. He was thinking the world had been against them all for a long time, and he'd be damned if it was going to take one of them now. Oh yes! He was suddenly very clear about this.

Meanwhile Hermione was thinking how many lives had ended in meaningless chaos, amid the wail and whimper of a humanity on its uppers. She would rather kill herself than end up here, perhaps a frail and frightened geriatric, and she made a resolution to research the most painless and efficient way of doing it.

"I'll take Kyle for some air, all right Finn?"

Finn nodded. He'd stand guard all night if he had to, but in fact stood only for an hour, before a kindly nurse found him a chair, so then he sat and Helena surprised him by seeking out his hand.

She enquired weakly through her mask: "Kyle?"

"With Hermione. They'll be back soon."

"I don't want him here. This place. It's too much. It stinks. All this sickness. Take him away. Keep him safe for me. Leave me. Let me die."

"We're going nowhere until you're sorted out. And you're not going to die. I forbid it."

Helena responded with a faint pressure of her hand.

Hermione returned, sent Finn then for some air and to check on Kyle who she'd left in the car, convinced by now his mother was indeed going to die. Finn was tasked with somehow persuading him of the impossibility. The best he could come up with was Kyle's mother was too beautiful to die, that and how, half joking, the denizens of the other side would be keener for her to remain in the land of the living, than have to deal with her explosive nature themselves.

He and Hermione alternated hour by hour.

It was another few hours before Helena was seen by a doctor, a girl in her twenties with bags under eyes and thin, pale hands that shook. She'd been on call for twenty four hours. This was normal. Finn told her what he knew, and Helena was right, the word 'bullet' raised alarm bells. The police were informed.

Two AM, and Helena was finally admitted to a surgical assessment ward. It was quieter there, though on the bed opposite lay a man, unconscious, bare chested and obscenely hairy. A woman sat with him, weeping quietly. Meanwhile a dour night-duty DS turned up and, since Helena was unconscious, he questioned Finn, called him into the waiting area outside where the seats and walls were sticky with the passing of a million miseries.

Hermione had joined him by this time and sat aside, sullen, barely able to conceal her contempt of the cop. She left them abruptly, went to check on Helena, returned when the cop had gone. She told Finn Helena had now been given antibiotics for the infection, and steroids for the inflammation, and that her saline drip had been changed.

None of this was meaningful.

The girl with the shaking hands was replaced by a tired old Pakistani man in surgical scrubs. He had the look of one who'd seen a thousand people die and was now indifferent to it. Finn had seen that look before, the tiredness, and a kind of sustained shock that had displaced all natural compassion, replaced it with a self-protective resilience to life's frailty. It terrified him, that look. It was a look that had presided over the deaths of his mother, and his father. It was the look of the angel of death.

Four AM and Kyle was curled up in a plastic chair beside them, dozing. Finn and Hermione sat together, waiting for news.

"Not exactly how I'd planned to be spending our night together, Finn."

"I know."

"Will she be all right now, do you think?"

It was an empty question. She knew neither of them had the answer. It was the reassurance of belief, of conviction against the odds they both sought now, and both were inexplicably panicked at the thought they might lose her. In some weird way, Helena, in her sickness, was revealed as an essential part of them both. Only recently come into their lives, their lives would not be the same without her, even though each presumed they now had each other as well.

"They'll maybe stabilise her," he said, "then send her home."

He said this because that's what they'd done with his mum. Sent her home in the small hours with an inoperable cancer, cold-shouldered her, sent her home to die because they needed the bed for someone else, someone they had a chance of saving. He had wanted them to divvy up the miracle that would save her, and in that one act of dreadful pragmatism, had instead revealed to him the truth. Few realised he thought, the war zone the health service had become, that is until they needed it.

"You mean they won't,... operate or anything?"

"Not tonight. They'll need x-rays and stuff, and the technicians won't come on 'til morning. There must be hundreds here tonight just as bad or worse than Helena, and by the looks of it barely the staff to deal with a dozen of them. I know because I'm the one who allocates the budget that says how many staff they can have. They'll refer her back to the GP in Carrickbar, who most likely won't know what to do with her and he'll refer her right back to the hospital."

"But,... it could happen again. And she can't live on steroids and antibiotics. That stuff's lethal. And,... you're talkin' like it's your fault. But you don't set the budgets any more Finn. And you never set 'em anyway. You just managed 'em, dished out what little you got. To hear you talk it was like you spent all that money on fancy cars and fings. And anyway, you've done with all that. That's all behind you now."

"Maybe. But then again, if she'd not travelled all the way to see me,... twelve hours on an overcrowded train. And I bet she had to stand for half of that. That's what set her off, I'm sure of it. Why didn't she just ring and tell me to come back?"

"Well, would you have come?"

"I would've seen sense eventually. Eventually I would've realised I had to."

"Had to? Why?"

"To see how you felt,... about me, of course."

"Well, if I'd had a bit more about me I would have shut the cafe and come see you myself,... 'cept I assumed you and she were,... you know. *At it*. So I was thinking more like *fuck you, Finn Finucane, you bleedin' moron*."

"We were never *at it*."

"I know that now. But,... why not?"

"You would've preferred it if we had?"

Kyle stirred, sleepily. "I can hear you, you know?"

"Sorry, Kyle, darlin'."

Hermione gave him change for the snack machine, and he shuffled off with a sigh. Hermione watched him go, felt her heart breaking for him, then turned back to Finn. "'Course not. 'Course I didn't want that. But,... still, why not? Why didn't you? If I was a bloke I'd find her hard to resist myself."

"Well, for one thing, somewhat bizarrely she'd already decided you were the girl for me, and seemed rather set on that idea. And two, although the way I'm feeling right now at the thought we could lose her tells me that in some weird and slightly disturbing way, I'm obviously, deeply in love with her, I think actually living with her would drive me mad."

Hermione looked around to make sure no one, and especially Kyle was within earshot. "Well, always knew you weren't completely stupid. You'd still fuck her though, given half the chance."

"I would *not!"*

Why not, she thought.

What's wrong with him?

"You'd tell me though," she said. "I mean, if you did, or if you wanted to? You wouldn't just do it behind my back, the two of you?"

"What?... Oh,... wait,... this is about you and your husband isn't it? What's his name? Brian?"

Hermione laughed to clear the air. Was Finn right? Was that it? Could he really be so perceptive? Was it Brian, or something else? "She said the same thing about you, you know?"

"Oh, what's that?"

"How living with you would drive her mad."

"Really? Helena said that?"

"Not enough fight in you. And mending those little watches."

"What about my little watches?"

"Dunno. Just,... drive her mad, she said."

"I see. Well, women are always moaning about men not understanding them. Seems to me women have no interest in understanding men either."

Hermione nodded, thought for a moment: "Sounds like love to me."

"Of course I love her. We've already established that. We *both* love her, or we wouldn't be here."

"Yea, but I'm all right to love her, 'cos she's a girl, okay? For you to love her too it's weird."

"Many kinds of love, Hermione."

"I know."

She felt a quiver. Yes, there were many kinds of love. She loved Helena, but definitely not in *that* way. Not in the way she thought or feared Finn loved her. And that thing she'd said about if she'd been a bloke and fancying Helena herself, well that was stupid, because she wasn't a bloke, was she?

"Some creatures mate rough, don't they?" he said. "I suspect Helena's like that. Hard to tell if you're making love or fighting for your life."

Hermione was intrigued by the idea, intrigued also why Finn should think of it, for surely he'd misread Helena or at least read her only on a very basic level, otherwise he'd know that, although Helena had been engaged in a fight for survival for most of her adult life, what she craved was a return to the gentleness of her childhood, both in life and in love. Or at least that's the way Hermione saw it.

"Your wife like that?" she asked. "I mean a rough mater? Were you always fighting for your life with her, Finn?"

Finn tried to remember what Kathleen had been like in the days before they'd begun to simply ignore one another. "No. We were always very,... I don't know,... plain and functional I suppose. We always got on. But after the first flush, our jobs took over and we started to conduct our marriage like a business, except we'd not the same

objectives as a business."

"Objectives?"

"Maximise profits for the few at the expense of the many. That's rule number one in business. But marriage is a rejection of that, or at least it's supposed to be. It's about being together because you choose to be, not because there's a tangible reason, or that you'll be materially worse off if you aren't. I mean,.."

Just then the old guy in surgical scrubs reappeared. Finn and Hermione broke off and looked at him expectant of some miracle of good news. His pace was slow, his expression blank. He didn't look at them, passed unawares, passed on like they weren't there, his demeanour aloof, unapproachable.

"Look at that guy," said Finn.

"What about him?"

"Do you detect even a hint of compassion about him?"

"He can't afford any. He's a surgeon. Got to harden himself."

"Really? I'm just imagining things seemed warmer in the past then. That everyone was happier, friendlier,... more innocent."

"When we were kids, you mean? When our mums were around to keep the world at bay and soften all our falls? Sounds like you had a better mother than me. Mine was more concerned with letting everyone know how perfect she was and how fuckin' dim I was. Sorry,.. spending too much time with Helena,... starting to swear like her now."

"Is that why you compensate?"

"What you mean?"

"Is that why you're a mother to everyone you meet?"

"Dunno, am I?"

Finn caught her hand, squeezed it. "You can't be a real healer without compassion. And you're very compassionate, Min."

She smiled, softened, blushed a little. "And what about that other girlfriend of yours, Carina? She compassionate too?"

She was testing his defences, but at that time in the morning Finn didn't have any. "Yes, she has the gift too. It's a kind of tough compassion with her, but then she's also fighting against a system that's trying to destroy her. I've known her for years, but without really knowing her, you know? She's a strange one. I think she saved my life."

"But you've never shagged her?"

He laughed. "First Helena, now Carina? What an interesting and varied sex life I lead - I mean me still being married and all. But no, we've never done that.

"It was Carina who persuaded me to run. Life, marriage, job, the whole thing really. Leave it, she said. Said it was killing me. And I think it was. It felt wrong, because you don't run away do you? A man has to stand up and face things, even if it's an oncoming truck. But if no one actually needs you any more, then you're just punishing yourself by staying. No, I see it more clearly now - my marriage was a business. We compared diaries. Talked shop."

"Sounds a bit cold if you put it like that. You and Kathleen, I mean."

"Worse than that, we were destroying the world, both of us in our different ways sucking the money out of it and giving it to people who didn't deserve it."
It was five am now, and everything was dramatic. Kyle had returned, munching morosely on a Lion bar. He curled up in his chair again, laid his head on his arm and closed his eyes.

Hermione swallowed back a lump in her throat, drew Finn a little way down the corridor, so Kyle couldn't overhear. "If anything happens to Helena,..."

"It won't,... don't even think it."

"Okay, okay, but if it does, I think she wants us to look after him. You know. She said."

"Oh?"

"So,... you up for that?"

"But,... he has a father."

"Helena won't want that. And he's over eighteen. He can stay with us,... if he wants to, and you're okay with that?"

Finn looked at Kyle, curled up, immobile. "Can't make any worse a job of it than I have with my own kids."

"So,... you'll definitely be stickin' around then?"

The question of Finn's sticking around was dependent upon how much he wanted Hermione. And he wanted her a lot. It was a surprisingly easy question to answer: "Carrickbar is where I am now."

He felt he was sincere, *wanted* to be sincere, but Hermione read it more as an aspiration than an affirmation.

As the small hours melted into dawn, Finn was reminded of a dream he'd had. "I'm in this city that's all in ruins, Min. There's no food and there's no water. And I'm sitting in a first class railway compartment, me and Kathleen. We're at the station and the train's all loaded up with rich people. And I look down, and on the platform there are these other people, you know? And they'll have to make do as best they can, but everything they once had is on the train because we've taken it from them, and they don't know it yet but they're going to find it hard, and we're going to find it easy. And we despise them for their poverty, and they hate us for our riches. And the train's pulling out,..."

"And you feel guilty 'cos you're still sitting on it?"

"Yes. I think the dream was telling me to get off the train."

"Well, you got off it all right, wound up in Carrickbar. God help you."

Kathleen, Carina, Helena, Hermione. The four wives of Finn Finucane - well potentially at least, or metaphorically, or something. She wondered about that, wondered about her position in this odd quartet, and the chances of keeping him, and why she would want to, or if Finn was right and any doubts she had were on account of her time with Brian, that she couldn't believe totally in Finn's decency - that all men were like Brian, or Squinty, so all men were bastards.

Brian had known many women, a different one every Saturday night, and she'd known none of them, except for the last who'd turned up at her door already eight months gone. At least this time she knew who her potential rivals were. And it was not so much the thought he might be at any time seduced by the others that worried her so much as the thought he would not be honest with her about it, that after all of this, she'd wake up to find she'd been wrong about Finn Finucane, wake up to find he'd been making love to the other three behind her back all the time.

'Jealousy, Hermione?'

'Yea well. Natural innit?'

By Six a.m. Helena's condition had stabilised, though what that condition was exactly no one actually knew. She was scheduled to remain under observation for a few days. There would be x-rays and blood tests. At nine, Finn and Hermione were persuaded by nursing staff to go home, but before they left they had another visit by a uniformed officer, and this time also a plain clothed man who did not introduce himself. Finn could read him though. A button had been pressed, a file opened, and questions were being asked about Helena's past, and possible links to terrorism.

But Helena was sleeping.

They'd wait, said the copper, so Finn refused to leave until they gone, resumed his vigil arms folded at her bedside, gave Hermione the keys to his car, asked her to drive home with Kyle, make sure he was okay, and come back for him later.

Hermione kissed him, and then she drove, and as she drove, chatting to Kyle to keep his spirits up she wondered how she felt, because she felt strange. The night had taken it out of her for sure, and a lot of odd things had been said. Of Finn's women it was clearly still Helena who troubled her the most, and it was not purely on account of her not knowing the other two in person. She had not wanted to go, to leave Helena, but not out of jealousy that Finn might actually want Helena, more because in a way she could not explain, she wanted Helena too, that in the affection stakes Helena was not her rival for Finn, but maybe more Finn for Helena.

Did that make sense?

Did that mean Hermione loved Helena?

Or more to the point did it mean she was *in* love with her?

'Don't be stupid, Hermione. That's just weird!"

Kyle fiddled with the radio, punched buttons. "Mum'll be all right now, won't she?"

Hermione was unused to driving anything so big as Finn's car. She was afraid she'd crash it or bend it or scratch it, just as she was afraid of bending his life for lack of care or concentration.

"Sure she will, darlin'. Few days and she'll be home, right as rain."

She shook her head clear. Helena and her crazy mouth! There's Hermione, not daring to trust Finn around Helena, when it was Finn who should be wary of trusting Hermione. She'd never thought of a woman that way before, wasn't sure if she was thinking of one that way now. It was as well you could choose who you loved, I mean in *that* way, that she had already chosen Finn.

Anything else was just weird.

Chapter Fifty Six

Finn thought about Hermione as Helena lay sleeping beside him. It had been a day of tests, of x rays, of bloods, and drips, and little news. They had moved her from the surgical assessment ward to a side room. In her more lucid moments, Helena had been voluble and cursing, for which Finn had apologised, and Helena had cursed him for apologising. So they'd put her in the side room.

He was thinking about Hermione, of how she had gyrated upon him, her hips, her sex all as nimble and coordinated as her hands in drawing up from him what it was they both wanted. And of course there had been the tender fun of it.

Thinking of her now aroused him in a way he was unused to.

The policeman and the man of mystery had gone away. They would call on Helena at home, the policeman said. The man of mystery had said nothing. It had not shaken their interest when Finn told them what she had told him, that Helena had been wounded while running from armed militia in a civil war twenty years ago. It seemed ironic to him in all that time, a period of proud independence and fiery spirit, she had been of no interest to anyone. Only now, in her vulnerability and her need did she come under suspicion of subversion.

Was she Muslim?

I'm sorry?

Muslim, sir!

Finn had supposed she was not Muslim, but his suppositions were of no use. They wanted facts, but facts were malleable for they had already mistaken her nationality as Chechen - this he supposed because of its part Muslim ethnicity, and its own recent tragic history. He had corrected them, but they had not written it down, and indeed asked the question more than once, as if it would make a difference to Finn's answer if they came at it from a different direction. He feared that in the end it all came down to what they wanted to believe. Yes, the men frightened him - the stone faced and rather dim pedantry of the one, and the inexpressive yet ever watchful presence of the other.

Hermione again:

He recalled the possessive weight of her against his shoulder that morning. No,.. that would be yesterday morning. Finn had not slept for twenty four hours. Hermione - the feel of her, the memory of her touch. And how wonderful, that sense of her possessing him. It was odd, in having lacked a thing for so long, he had now encountered it in such abundance he did not know properly what to do with it.

"Finn?"

Helena was awake, looking at him. How long she'd been like that he didn't know, and he braced himself for more anger and expletives. She would be a handful as a wife, for sure. She looked ill, her eyes huge in sunken bloodshot sockets, but in their brightness they were still very beautiful, startling, other-worldly. And she seemed at last at least,... calm. This was either the start of her return to wellness, or her final crisis. He drew a breath, told himself her crisis was over, that she would recover.

Anything else was unthinkable.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"I am train-wreck, Finn. I am car-crash. They have taken bullet out?"

"No. They're going to refer you somewhere else for that. They'll send you home in the mean time, when they're happy you can manage."

"Kyle?"

"Gone home with Hermione. He's fine."

"I have drug addled memories of craziness. I hope I have not offended anyone. I shall apologise to everyone of course, individually. And I hope I have not been,... unkind to you."

"You were a little crazy. It was just the medication. Don't worry."

"You did not call my husband?"

"No."

"Good. So,... when do they send me home?"

"You're in the hands of the doctors on that one."

"I am in my own hands, Finn. You must go home too, now. Rest. Make love to Hermione for me. I will be all right."

Make love to her for me?

"Em,... Hermione's picking me up later. I didn't want to leave you alone here while the cops were around."

Helena was alarmed at this. "Cops? They have been here? Can they take my passport away? I don't want to leave England. I am safe here."

"They'd need a good reason to take your passport away."

"I have nothing to hide, except my love for you."

"Em,..."

Helena smiled, teasing, returning to her old self, obviously, but Finn could not be sure she was joking.

"Don't worry about the cops," he said. "They have a procedure to follow. More importantly though, Helena, this illness,... it'll most likely happen again, won't it, unless we can get that bullet out of you?"

"What have they told you?"

"Not much. I'm not your husband. They'll talk to you directly when they think you're lucid enough to understand."

"Hmm, then maybe never. I know I sound drunk most of the time. But this is sad, this legally responsible thing. It is an official recognition of who my loved ones are. And really, I love you, Finn. You are my husband now."

"You have Kyle."

"That is different. You have children. You would not have them legally responsible for you."

"I doubt they'd want to be. Kyle's different."

"All children must watch their parents die at some point. They must be accepting of this."

"Sure, but not yet. You've only just turned forty."

"How you know?"

"I took you out to dinner to celebrate it, remember?"

"Ah,... yes, darling. This was surely the evening I fell in love with you. But already it is a long time ago. I must be fifty by now. Except I shall say I am thirty five, and swear you to keep the secret."

"On my honour."

"Tell me, what do you see in Hermione?"

"See?"

"You are an educated, professional man. Hermione runs a cafe, and the Romanian girl who helps her speaks better English than she does."

"Let me see if I understand you. After fixing us up, you're now trying to tell me we're incompatible because of our different income and social backgrounds?"

"Yes, yes,... possibly. But what do you *see* in her? Your answer interests me. For sure it does."

"My father was a clerk in a bank. My mother was a canteen dolly. I don't see people through their income and social background, or their education. It's not so much what I see in Hermione, as what I feel when I'm near her."

"Ah,... this is a good answer, Finn. But it is also the sentimental view, and socially unrealistic. You married Kathleen, also a professional lady with degree from English University."

"Yes. And look how well that turned out."

"I think I am in love with her also."

"Kathleen?"

"No, Hermione. Did she tell you I offered marriage to her yesterday?"

"Em,... you mentioned something of the kind. I assumed you were off your head on pain killers or something?"

"Possibly. I hope I didn't frighten her. I have a crazy mouth. It says out loud what I am thinking, and we all think crazy things don't we? You will please tell her I withdraw my offer. It is too complicated, and besides my needs are selfish and short term."

"I doubt you frightened Hermione. As for the offer, you'll have to tell her yourself. And there was me thinking Squinty Mulligan was my only love rival, and all along it's been you."

"It's not the first time I have been compared with this man. I am unhappy about that. But tell me, do you never think things you would be afraid to say out loud?"

"All the time. It's only our restraint that holds society together, keeps us in our jobs, our relationships,..."

"Or maybe if we could be more open and say what we think we would not trap ourselves in those things that make us unhappy all the time."

"But we don't always mean what we think, do we? A second ago you thought you were in love with me. And say a man wants to stay married, he can't go admitting to his wife he still imagines being with other women can he? He can't say to her he thinks he's in love with other women."

"She is a fool if she does not understand this is the way things are for all men, and he is better off not living with such a possessive bitch. And anyway is she not thinking of being with other men also? Thought is not a betrayal, Finn. Not a crime. It's how we act that's the important thing. We cannot be held guilty for what we are thinking."

Try explaining that to Hermione, thought Finn, after telling her how many times he'd imagined being with Helena. But those thoughts were closed off now. He had closed them off, denied himself access to them. As for Helena and Hermione, well that was just Helena being Helena.

Wasn't it?

"So, say we were together, Helena. You and I. And I told you I was in love with Hermione. You'd be okay with that?"

Helena smiled. "Of course not. I'd cut your fucking balls off."

He laughed, shook his head. "You're impossible, you know?"

"Yes. If I am impossible, it is the only way I know I am doing things right. You flatter me, Finn. And you make me laugh. Above all else, this is why I love you. And like the lady said, a man who can make a woman laugh,..."

"All right, all right,..."

Chapter Fifty Seven

February turns to March. It brings a succession of cloudy-bright days and heavy seas, driven in by a roaring wind. Hermione and Anica run with their heads tucked into it, and on their return they feel themselves flying with each step as the wind drives and lifts them.

"Butting through the channel in the mad March days."

"You say something Hermione?"

"A poem. We learned it at school. Don't know why that popped into my head. Can't remember any more of it."

"Love makes you poetic. You are very dreamy these days."

"Did you just call me pathetic, you cheeky little minx?"

"No, I said *poetic."*

Hermione is irritable these days on account of insufficient sleep and discomfort, courtesy of a dose of cystitis - both symptoms of a suddenly enthusiastic love-life, according to the doctor. It could be worse - a dose of thrush, which is harder to get rid of, or chlemidia, which is much worse. Still, it's clear she excites Finn, clear he's actually, truly, really,... in love with her, even though he has yet to say so. And always ready to soothe this sleep-deprived irritation, is the thought of making love to him again.

"Dirty British coaster with a salt caked smoke stack. That's another line. John Maesfield, I think."

"You like this poem?"

"Nah. Hated it. It's got some funny words at the beginning I can't pronounce, and the teacher always used to laugh at me when I tried."

"Hmm? You think Kyle is in love with me?"

"What? Ah,... Dunno. You in love with him?"

"Dunno. Am I turning poetic?"

"Not so's I've noticed. But seriously, Annie, you need to be careful

there."

"With Kyle?"

"Yes with Kyle, but more with his,.."

"Mother? Mrs Aynslea? I know. She is a very scary lady, even when she is sick. The way she looks sometimes down her nose,... it makes me want to wet myself."

Hermione knows this is true, has spent a good deal of time being scared of Helena too, is still scared, but in another way lately. "She's all right once you get to know her."

"Yes, but she is very careful with her friends. She thinks I will steal Kyle from her, take him back to Romania perhaps?"

"Nothing much for him round here, darlin', so might be a good thing if you did. But you'd have to keep quiet about it if that's what you're planning, 'cos if she found out,..."

"You will tell her? I know you are friends now."

"I won't tell her. I,... couldn't."

"Don't worry, this is not my plan. There is nothing for Kyle in Romania, or me. Why do you think I came here?"

"Not sure, Annie. Things 'aint that great for youngsters here neither. Even with degrees and stuff."

"'Either' Minny. Remember? Sure. Things are difficult the world over, except maybe the far east, and there too eventually. I am finding this out. When I came I wanted to earn a little money, learn better English, then go to an English university. It all seemed so simple. Now I don't know. It is very expensive, and then if I am lucky I will find myself work in a shop alongside others who have nothing. It makes me ask who is the foolish one. But your Mr. Finn will help. I am going to work for him now."

"Finn?"

"Kyle also. It is all decided. Lionel and Finn and Kyle and me. We are to be partners."

"Oh, you mean this campsite thing?"

Finn has mentioned it to her. It sounds like a good idea, except for the bit about Mulligan owning the site. "Just one problem there, 'Darlin."

Anica nods, jogs on. "There must be a way, Hermione. Can we not think of something?"

Hermione cannot, other than letting Squinty have a feel of her tits in exchange for agreeing to sell. But she suspects money might also be a problem, that Finn is here living off his savings, and when they've gone all dreams will end. Sooner or later he'll have to talk to his wife, and for now she would rather not think about any of that. They have a year, maybe a little more, and until then she's determined to wallow snug in the possession of him, and in defiance of all common sense.

The madness of it intoxicates her, and in bed he is like putty to be moulded into the shape of her own erotic imagination. He will do anything for her, and her nights, once empty have been illuminated by the bright light of one sweet shuddering orgasm after the other. Mr Hardy was never so warm and amenable a lover as Finn Finucane!

"Hermione?"

"Hmmm?"

"Really you are sooo dreamy, and I am jealous. I would like a boyfriend like Mr. Finn. Except much younger of course. I am thinking like Kyle. For sure he would be a good boyfriend for me."

"You reckon? Why?"

"I think,... he would be kind. And he would never deliberately hurt anyone."

Hermione feels her heart quiver. "Sure. But,... you do know Kyle's a bit?..."

"A bit what?" The girl turns, a sharpness in her defence of Kyle.

"You know what I mean. A bit,... vulnerable,... sensitive. Just,... be careful."

Anica quickens her pace, little flicks of sand thrown up from under her trainers. Hermione's legs feel leaden now, another symptom of her renewed love life. She cannot match pace, lets the girl go.

Love's a bitch.

So,...

8:30 a.m. and she fastens on the old watch Finn gave her for Valentine's, a pretty little thing, though she keeps forgetting to wind it. Once or twice it has put her in a mind to wind her father's watch too - just to hear it tick. As usual though she is content to loop it through her belt because it bears his name and she feels it is still her penance to carry it.

Downstairs, Anica is vigorously polishing the inside of the new plate glass window. There is a giant transfer on it now that says: "The Sea View Cafe". It was expensive and it attracts dust, but it's cheerful and Hermione considers it worth the money. It adds something, she thinks. And takings are edging up.

She assumes Anica is trying not to think of Kyle, or her dead sister, or how many thousands of miles she is away from home, in place she can never now call home for fear of the foam-mouthed xenophobes they see on TV.

She has seen nothing of Squinty Mulligan since the day he showed her his giant cucumber. The rumour is he has gone away. They watch day to day for activity around the garage, but there is nothing. Even the mysterious van has gone now. She keeps it quiet, the fact she is concerned for him - yes for Squinty, the lecherous old fool. She wishes she could find him a better girlfriend than Maureen. It would perhaps calm him. Some men are simply short of a good mother, and Maureen is not the motherly type - though there were rumours of a son.

Yes, yes, so what? Squinty was too forward in the exposing of himself, *and* he smashed her window, *and* she's supposed to hate him, or at least shudder every time she thinks of him, but she doesn't, okay? She's bigger than that, and can see it was the child in him, and all men are children, some more petulant than others. Sure, the way he looks at her makes her flesh crawl, but it is not within her to hate, at least not for very long.

Except cops. She still hates cops.

That's one night she'll never forget.

Helena is home from the hospital now, resting, still weak, though recovering her colour, her beauty, and the volume of her expletives. She has a date for surgery in the autumn. This seems too long to wait for something so serious, but the prognosis is good. The bullet is not a bullet after all but fragments of a grenade - this diagnosis from a surgeon who has served in the army. But all the bits of it have now worked themselves into positions accessible to scalpel and tweezers, and with minimal risk, though that risk be waist-down paralysis. There is also the option of a little plastic surgery to tidy the earlier scar on her back. They can make her good as new,... well almost.

What's not to like?

But Helena avoids all discussion of the matter, changes the subject whenever Hermione brings it up. Helena also avoids mention of marriage, and Hermione finds she is disappointed, disappointed also Helen seems no longer in the mood for flirting. She has decided she is not in love with Helena, at least not in *that* way, but realises she did at least enjoy flirting with her. It was a game, saucy, a little dirty, and therefore safer played with a woman than with a man.

Strange?

Sure.

Interesting though.

And it is the strangeness of these thoughts, she tells herself, also her detached interest in them that has lent material for the dreams she's been having in which Hermione experiences scalding hot encounters with Helena, and the fact of them embarrasses her in Helena's company, so that she's sure Helena will notice. She does not feel guilty about it. One cannot be held guilty for one's dreams.

She is very clear about this.

She's noticed how Finn likes to cup her sex in his palm. He has a light touch, and she imagines he is feeling the texture of her pubic hair, feeling for the life and the softness and the wet well beneath. And it releases something in him - a tension, an anticipation, the fear it might have been a dream, the last time they made love. And at the first touch

he gives a sigh as if this is the most exciting thing in the world. And in her first dreams of Helena, she has sought this same experience, sought the sensation of it, of hearing that sigh from Helena's lips.

Her palm, her arm, her breast tingles when she thinks of it. But her dreams and her thoughts are her own. Until she acts upon them, *which she never will*, they have nothing to do with Finn or Helena, or anyone.

Again, on this, she is very clear.

She has researched the world of the Sapphic online, out of idle interest, she tells herself. But she has discovered it to be a difficult thing to explore without running into the male-centric world of girl on girl pornography. She has cringed at the various and obviously unhygienic uses to which rubber willy's are put. But here too she has discovered attractive, softly shot videos of women making a very feminine kind of love by rubbing tenderly each their clitoris against the other.

She likes the look of that particular thing - it seeming to her the more physically expressive of girl on girl lovemaking, the less mechanical, and that it is possible with only the equipment God gave them seems all the more significant. What is also intriguing to her is the fact that her reading of the subject suggests these women are not necessarily Lesbians at all. The act is merely a functional requirement of the 'industry' they work in, yet they speak of enjoying it, while at the same time rejecting the label of Lesbianism.

The fact a woman can enjoy sex with another woman and not be a Lesbian is both strange and liberating to her. She does not want to be called a Lesbian and feels sure only with Helena would such an experience be empowering, and above all purposeful. Only with Helena is there the necessary emotional connection. With any other woman, the thought of such intimacy leaves her cold as she presumes Finn would feel at the thought of touching another man. But with Helena it is as easy as the thought of touching herself - not that she would allow herself to be taken by Helena. It is Helena who must be the submissive in this, Helena the more submissively wanting of it, or it will never happen. Otherwise Helena, given rein, would crush her.

'An orgasm that is not self inflicted, Minny,'

'Sure I could do that.'

'And if she did, would she tell Finn?'

'Why should she? That's girl stuff. A man would never understand it.'

Anica looks across at her. "So, what are you thinking about, Minny?"

"Hmm?"

They are sitting in the empty Sea View. Anica behind the counter now, swiping endlessly on the pad, intrigued by Hermione's search history. Hermione is at one of the tables, watching the sea, folding paper napkins, but mostly she is just watching the sea. "Oh,.. nothin' much," she replies. "Biker boys are late this mornin'."

She consults the watch Finn gave her, imagines him having worked his way deep inside of it, cleaned through its impossible intricacy, set it in motion as smoothly as the day it was new.

'A good man, Minny. Do you see his smile?'

'Sure, but what's a guy like that see in me?'

Chapter Fifty Eight

Hermione's presence in Finn's life was mainly sexual, otherwise minimal. They had been lovers for a month, yet the only physical trace of her in his home, when she was not herself physically present, was a toothbrush.

He did not know what else he should expect, only he felt something was missing. It was an intimacy they did not share much beyond the pillow, and for now she was too busy with the café by day for him to take her out, away from Carrickbar, perhaps dine out of an evening, or maybe even go the Cinema in Weston – whatever it was couples did around here.

By the time the café was closed, it was already too cold and dark, she said, to think of venturing far. Better to hibernate, to snuggle up indoors - soft lights, soft music and the curtains drawn against the rain.

It was hard to resist.

He did not know what sort of movies she liked, what sort of books. He was coming to know a little more of the younger Hermione, Hermione the girl, the Fashion student, the naive wife. As for the Hermione of the present, he knew only that she worked hard, and enjoyed the physical things, a run on the beach of a morning, and making love with a physical intensity he had not believed possible.
She would come to him from the café and he would cook for her. She would already have showered and changed her clothes, not wanting to come to him, she said, smelling of the griddle, smelling of egg and bacon and chips. He had also noticed how she would brush her teeth before they made love. He had to respect this, to resist moving things in that direction until she had excused herself to do this one thing.

His opening moves were always timid, but it didn't matter. It was more an indication to her of his desire, and an enquiry as to her readiness. And his desire was always obvious to her, and she was always ready. And then her skill with him, her touch, her knowledge of the ways,... she had him thanking God, he was a man, then he might feel all a man could feel.

It was new - all of it - and to possess her in this way was everything to him, at least for now. He guessed it would settle to something less wanton, more companionable, eventually, and then would be the time for meaningful tete-a-tetes, for walks along the beach arm in arm, for

those candlelit dinners for two. Perhaps in the summer. But for now he could not sense the shape of it. He could not guess the shape of Finn and Min in five months time, let alone five years.

He sat thinking of her, an old Alfex on his desk, stripped to its hairspring, wanting oil. But in the scent of the oil he could smell her skin, and in the feel of it he could feel the very soul of Min. He'd already lost a couple of microscopic screws to the carpet. He would find them later by sweeping with a magnet, but for now his concentration was lacking.

He set the watch aside, sighed.

Min! Min! Min!

The landline rang:

"Finn?"

"Carina!"

There came a pause then, significant in that they both felt it and knew the plates had shifted between them. Finn's pause was the time it took to put away his thoughts of Hermione, to calm his arousal, for it did not seem appropriate to be talking to one woman whilst almost priapismic on account of another. The reason for Carina's pause was of course unknown to him, but Carina never hesitated unless something was wrong.

"So,.." she said. "How are you?"

"Em,... okay."

She sensed his guardedness, misread it for reluctance. "Is this a bad time for you?"

"No. It's,... never a bad time to hear from you, Carina. You know that."

"And how's the patient?"

"Me or Helena?"

"Both. You first."

"I'm fine."

"Headaches gone?"

"Yes."

"And Helena?"

"Home now. She has a date for surgery, but she's,... resisting it."

"The bullet needs to come out, Finn."

"We think it's a bit of an RPG now, actually."

"Whatever it is, it needs to come out."

"I know."

"So, I presume you and she?... by now,.."

"No. I mean,... I'm not stupid. She'd eat me alive."

"All right. Good call. Possibly. Then it's the other one,... Hermione?"

How does Carina know this? "Yes, we're,... sort of seeing each other."

Pause. "About time." Pause. "About time you got that out of the way."

The silence was awkward and Finn still didn't know why. What was that? He felt almost guilty, as if he had betrayed Carina by sleeping with another woman, by not wanting that woman to be her, even though he recalled he had in fact wanted it once. But he thought he'd got past all that. And Carina was not his wife. His wife was Kathleen, and he couldn't care less about what Kathleen thought - but there were clear reasons for that. As for Carina, he cared very much what she thought.

"And you Carina? Is everything all right with you?"

"Sure. I,.. I'm thinking I should take a dose of my own medicine, that's all. Wondered if I could run it by you. See what you thought."

"You mean you've persuaded yourself to quit the health service and flee to a bleak seaside town where no one knows you?"

"Something along those lines, and soon, I think."

"Has something happened?"

"One suicide too many."

"A patient?" For a moment he thought he was back in the hospital, pushing spreadsheets, listening to others discussing not the loss of a patient but the likelihood of litigation. "I'm,... sorry. Tell me about it."

Now he understood. Carina's voice was false. It was hiding the shock of the loss of a life, a life unknown to him, the aftermath of it still weighing on her. "I could have helped him, Finn, but twenty minutes a week even for a case flagged as urgent, wasn't enough."

"Not your fault, Carina. The system sets us all up to fail - the healers, like you, most of all."

"I know."

"What will you do?"

"Still thinking about it."

"There's no,... trouble over it is there?"

"Talk of an enquiry. Usual thing. Case notes will be gone through by disinterested third parties. Then the press will get hold of it, because these things always leak, don't they?"

She sounded odd now, almost emotional, almost as if she'd been drinking.

"And your prognosis?"

"Close the unit. Merge it with another. Not enough successful interventions. High risk. Public safety."

"But that's due to lack of funds. It's not for want of clinical competence."

"Depends how you measure it. You know how it goes, Finn."

"Sure,... I know. I know well enough how it's measured."

"But I don't want to rain on your parade. How's the sex?"

"Em,... it's good."

"Is she much younger than you? She sounded quite young on the phone. You may need to avoid overdoing it at first, you know, at your age - after so long a break from it."

"Ever the romantic. So, anyway, this is a pleasant surprise, hearing from you like this, voice to voice, instead of by text."

"I know. Wanted to hear your voice, that's all."

Finn felt a shiver. She had never spoken to him that way before - always feigning the ever insensitive clinician, but now she sounded needful and it was disorientating. Carina *needed* him.

"So," he said. "Where are you, exactly? Describe your surroundings to me."

"Home, lying in a hot bath, with a gin and tonic."

"You're joking about the G+T? It's barely 10:00 a.m."

"No, not joking. I've been drinking all night. And when I've drunk this I'm going to bed, then I'm going to sleep the clock round. I suppose you might say I'm pulling a sickie. Certainly I'm not going to be fit for work for a few days. Could I sign myself off do you think? I don't even know who my GP is."

"Want me to come over?"

"Coming over is a five hour drive for you. Just talk to me. I presume she's not there, Hermione, or you'd be less yourself on the 'phone. I mean talking to another woman. And you sound pretty much like your self, so far as I remember you."

"You were always perceptive in that way. But Carina,... be careful. Bath? Excessive alcohol? You sound like an accident waiting to happen. You should know the statistics on that one."

"Hmm, okay. Or are you just afraid I'll say something indiscreet? Afraid

I'll start speaking my mind?"

"As I recall you were never afraid to speak your mind. No, I'm more concerned you'll fall over trying to get out of the bath, bang your head and drown. So, listen, get out of the bath. Do it now, very carefully. Towel yourself dry, stay on the line, take the phone with you to bed. I'll talk to you until you pass out,... but in bed all right? Now go. And remember, I'm listening, and if I hear you fall over I'm coming, five hour drive or not. So be careful."

"Yes, Doctor Finbar. Can I also take my G+T?"

"If you think you can stomach it."

Finn heard the clunking of the phone as she set it aside, then the echoing slosh of water as she rose sluggishly from the bath. He imagined the scene vividly, familiar with every detail of her bathroom, though he was trying not to think of her naked. Carina always came fully clothed, and smiling. She did not come nude and hurt and dizzy drunk.

There were no alarming sounds, like her falling over, just a pause while she dried herself, then a gurgle of water as the plug was pulled, the clunk of the phone as she picked it up, then the sound of movement - doors, stairs, the creak of her bed, the rustling and the plumping of pillows. Then a sigh.

"Okay, I'm here," she said, and then: "So, you'll be staying on up there?"

"With Hermione. I guess so."

"Still mending watches?"

"Yes."

"That's why I have hope for you, doing things others would think pointless, when really it's the others we should worry about, those with nothing but their jobs and their crass lives, and their bigoted opinions."

"Carina, you're talking nonsense. You should sleep now."

"I know,... just talk to me a little longer. Tell me a story, Finn,... anything,..."

"What about?"

"Oh,... anything. Make it up."

"Well, that's pretty much the story of my life. Making it up as I go along."

"We're all the same. Everyone. Long term plans are always ripe for trashing. Events are what most of us react to. That's the story of all our lives."

Her voice softened, the words stretching out, growing faint as the phone moved away from her lips - her hand, her arm sagging with the onset of sleep.

Events are what we react to? That's the story of all our lives?

"Carina?..."

After a pause, she said: "I love you, Finn." But it was more of a sigh as the breath left her.

"Carina?"

Finally silence - just the steady rhythm of her breathing.

He had never worried about Carina before. She'd always been the one he looked to for wisdom and energy. Was she all right? Did he need to worry about her? How would she react to an intrusive enquiry into her conduct? How would she react to being arbitrarily struck off. This woman had been twelve years in the training. Twenty years in practice. It was her life.

Before he could dwell on it, his mobile pinged a notification - email from the bank notifying him of activity on his account. Puzzled now, he turned to the laptop, pulled up the various logins, portals to his finances. They were spread about in a range of savings and investments, some in Kathleen's name, some in joint, some in his. The joint accounts had been cleared of everything but for a token pound.

The only person beside him who could do that was Kathleen.

It had the feel of a pre-emptive strike. Kathleen had taken what she

could, while she could, and he was only surprised she had not thought to do so sooner.

Damn.

He was going to have to deal with it. He was going to have to speak to her, to begin the carve up, the break-up, the dismantling of their marriage. He was going to have to go south - arrange to meet Kathleen, but also to check on Carina while he was there because Carina was not the type to drink and sink. He didn't know if it was as serious as that with Carina, but there was more to it than she was telling him.

Then there came the sound of a key in the door. Finn looked up, already bewildered. as Hermione breezed in. She had an urgent look about her, her fingers tugging at the buttons of her blouse. He was unused to seeing her in the day, especially in the morning, and with the lunchtime rush about to start.

"Em,... hi, Min. Everything okay?"

She nodded as she tugged up the blouse from her waistband. "Just horny. 'Come on,'darlin, shag me quick, eh?"

"Em,..."

The emotions he'd been feeling only moments before gave way at once to lust, to the tight curve of her skirt over her hips and to the rising of an urgent want in him that fitted perfectly with her mood, and the suddenness of her appearance. She dragged his pants off where he sat, and delivered herself of her need. And Finn, lost and hungry, lay his head between her breasts as she rode him, then sought her kiss and she filled his mouth at once with a greedy plunge.

She tasted of toothpaste.

And then she left him, still erect and slick and cooling, gave him a cheeky wink in parting. "Be thinkin' 'bout you like that for the rest of the day, lover-boy."

She tugged the door shut behind her and he heard the sound of her heels on the street fading as she raced back to the Sea View to make lunches for her Biker Boys. He felt dizzy with the spin of things.

He'd tell her tonight, he thought - about Kathleen - but gently. And Carina?

No,... no need to tell her about Carina.

Chapter Fifty Nine

In most matters Squinty Mulligan took the view it was the substance of one's life that was the important thing, rather than appearances. The Mercedes on his tail, for example, was most likely not paid for. It would be a leased car. It was therefore the epitome of 'appearances'. Were the driver, a slickly coiffured and be-suited gent, to lose his job, he would lose his car, his rented home, everything. There was no substance to him. He was no more than a credit rating. He was also an arrogant twat pushing and pressing and looking for a squeeze-past, no matter how dangerous.

Squinty? He could buy a car like that outright, a fancy wrist-watch, a nice home. That he chose not to, that he chose instead to rumble about in his old Landrover, trailing a cloud of diesel fumes, was a question of personal credo, one of not showing off, or pretending to be something other than you were. The old man had taught him that. But it went deeper. Squinty had the money, had the substance - all be it gained by questionable means - but was averse to showing it off. All right, the truth was people might ask questions about the source of his 'substance', but Squinty was happy to overlook this fact and mislabel his discretion as humility.

Whatever, Squinty was not boastful.

In love it was different though.

Squinty was lonely, but it was pride that would not allow him to show it, or even admit it. He'd splashed out a bit on nice clothes, a haircut and a hot shave, and for a moment, that time in the supermarket, he was sure Hermione had warmed to him, or at least paused long enough to ask herself the question. But it had backfired on account of his impetuosity and, after much thought, he blamed Maureen for that. Yep, that was definitely Maureen’s fault, not his.

Traffic was thick heading into Manchester and the Merc was hanging close to his bumper like they always did, so close he couldn't even make out its lights. Mercs and BMW's and Audi's - they were all the same, predictable as wasps in September. It was still pushing and had been for miles, and he was getting annoyed with it.

'Maureen you say?'

Sure, it had been grand for a while, that thing with Maureen. It had

been a bit of a laugh, because there was no doubt she was fun to be with when she'd had a few, and very obliging afterwards, though often too drunk to remember any of it in the morning, so in a sense it was like the first time with her every time. They'd tried to do it sober, but it hadn't felt the same, and Squinty was getting to be of an age when he could no longer do it drunk. And to be fair Maureen probably only fancied him enough to be compliant when she was drunk as well.

Maureen's story was one of depression, of a son dead in Iraq, and a husband making money on a gas platform in the Irish Sea, a man who'd not been home in years, and most likely would not be coming home again. It had begun, this thing with Squinty, because he'd felt sorry for her, felt it would perk her up a bit, a bit of casual loving, like. And it had, but Maureen was an addict: booze and,... well,... you know,... sex and everything, and none of it satisfying her for very long, and he wasn't such a fool as to think he was the only one she was doing it with either.

Her house was a tip, the bedsheets unchanged in months, bottles of cheap gut-rot booze in the kitchen cupboards. His place wasn't much to look at either, but even Squinty had his standards. Sure a man would be a fool to expect anything but ruin in the arms of Maureen.

Now Hermione, on the other hand,... it was the cleanliness of the girl, and the kindness, and the warmth of her that drew him. That she disapproved of his banter he took for a feisty spirit, and it excited him, but she was soft enough too and he'd soon have her in her place if he could only find a way of connecting with her first. But he'd never been good with that sort of thing, playing women for keeps.

Aren't you forgetting the small matter of a broken window, Squinty - not to mention other transgressions?

Are you up for an apology yet?

Sure, okay, he'd find a way of apologising for that, offer to pay for the damage, be contrite - *I mean he was contrite, dammit* - and felt sure she'd be sweet about it.

You'll see.

For now though he had to make her jealous, put up some appearances in the shape of said contrition, work on the cleanliness,... maybe get some fancy-pants manners, like that Finucky guy.

Wait, did you say jealous, Squinty?

Sure, jealousy,... in the shape of another woman.

It was a twisty bit of road, and fast with a busy stream of traffic coming the other way. The Merc still wanted to go faster, to squeeze past, but since the traffic and the twistiness was against overtaking, the only thing it could do was nudge ever closer to Squinty's tail. Squinty grew tired of it and slammed on the brakes. He couldn't help himself. It was that impetuous devil in him again, the hair trigger, without which he'd probably do nothing at all. But there it was.

Bang!

The front of the Merc was crumpled like a bit of screwed up paper, because that's the way with cars these days. There was steam and the scent of oil and antifreeze. Nice smell, that, thought Squinty as he stepped down - you couldn't beat it. As for the back end of the Landrover it was hard to tell. It might have been missing a bit of paint, but on the other hand it could have been like that for a while - Squinty wasn't sure.

The dog was barking with the shock of it, but Squinty cowed it with a simple: "QUIET"

The driver of the Merc stepped out, pale, shaken, recovered a little when he mistook Squinty for a dishevelled old fart, and became uppity. Squinty cast him his most docile look, and those who knew Squinty knew that was when he was at his most dangerous.

"Didn't you see the fox?" said Squinty.

"Fox?"

"Fox ran in front of me. Had to brake hard. Pity you were so close." He wrote down his details. "Your fault, mate." he said. He tapped the back of the Landrover. Got you on my tail-cam right up my arse for the past half hour. Got you on your dashcam too, come to think of it, so if you've any sense you'll be wiping it. Was just saying to myself I hope I don't have to pull up sharp, like. Anyway,..." He gave the man his address. "You probably won't hear from me. Mine's had worse knocks than that. Shame about yours though. Was a nice car."

He was smiling as he drove away.

An omen.

It was going to be a good day.

Chapter Sixty

Kathleen looked out of place in the garden centre café. The last time he remembered her sitting there, she'd worn jeans and a faded, bobbled green Gillet. In those days she'd been the middle-aged suburban lady with an interest in roses and the many varieties of compost. That had been only last summer, already a lifetime ago.

"I knew the thing with the money would bring you running," she said.

She wore a red suit, power heels, low cut blouse with provocative half moons of cleavage, a cluster of gold and jewelled pendants nestling there, and a gash of red lipstick. Finn suspected this was for his benefit - well, not "benefit" exactly, more to show him what he was missing, this power-dressing sexy corporate Amazon, feeling and looking ten years younger than when they'd last met - all of which was true. He had to admit it was a masterfully executed 'Fuck you, Finn'.

She'd a flight to catch, she explained - no preamble. Check in was a couple of hours away and she'd yet to pack, so she couldn't hang about. But for now, here she was caught back in the trap of this tired old garden centre. It was a place she and Finn had visited at weekends to stock the gardens of a long line of upwardly mobile properties. That was back when their lives had been new and blessed, and had seemed to mean something.

There was nothing in the café fit for consumption, never had been, even the tea, which she declined, was vulnerable to ruin by minimum wage slavers who understandably didn't care if it was stewed or spoiled or cold. Finn nursed his usual Americano out of politeness, black, no sugar. There was a film of detergent on top, circling slowly, which he tried to ignore. It lent a chemical taste.

He meant business. She could tell because he was wearing the Omega. Dear God! Finn and his watches for all occasions, like he was obsessed with time, yet paradoxically also the most unpunctual, and generally unreliable man she'd ever known. But for all of that he seemed calm, less jittery than the last time, which was so long ago she could not remember exactly. She'd known something was wrong then, but hadn't cared enough to ask about it. The main thing was he seemed magnanimous about the worst bit: the bit that involved,... well, her and Richard. And that had to be good.

He was tired, still coming down to earth after his drive from the north, seemed lost for words, even perhaps overwhelmed to see her. Let your heart bleed, Finn and serve you right. No,... actually, she did feel a little sorry for him, sensed that whatever was coming, she was better placed to weather it than he.

How to begin then?

Simply she supposed:

"About the money," she said - again no preamble, straight to the crux: "I didn't mean to keep it. I'm not that vindictive. But transferring it was the only way I could think of making you get in touch. You left me no choice. And it's rather a piddling little amount compared to what I'm earning nowadays anyway. I've already put your half of it back."

Finn nodded, noted the phrase: "your half". He'd not expected that. It was clever of her, interesting also the reminder of the disparity in their earnings and the implications: that they were no longer of a similar social and income bracket, no longer compatible in that most important of ways.

In olden times the gentry would never have intermarried with commoners. It was the same now, only the gentry were self made, a generation of spivs and but one slip from being commoners again themselves, or convicts. Maybe that's what drove them, the fear of being poor again, or getting found out. Maybe that's what made them mean.

"We'll go fifty fifty," she said. "Put the house on the market, split it equally. Do you want a divorce?"

Sudden, that word. It stunned him. He'd not expected it to come up so soon. He repeated it. "Divorce?"

"It's up to you, but it seems a faff right now, that's all. What do you think?"

"I,... don't know. Won't you want to,... marry again?"

She looked surprised: "I'd not thought of it," she said.

Meaning Richard hadn't asked her, or he'd asked and she'd said no, or she was already moving on. Or was Finn simply too naive in his views

of romance and relationships nowadays? Sure, marriage was far too risky a thing - financially that is - at least for the richer party. She looked out of the murky window at an old man inspecting ceramic pots. "Typical of you, by the way," she said.

"Oh?"

"This place. It's likely our last meeting, and you couldn't think of anywhere more upmarket?"

Meaning you always did lack ambition, Finn.

Ambition and style.

She was smiling, but a part of her meant it all the same, a complex subterfuge to both amuse and hurt. Their last meeting? Finn supposed it was, probably, but he'd not thought that far. That was the difference between them: her Outlook Planner covered her comings a goings a year in advance. And Finn? He never used the Outlook Planner.

"Couldn't think of anywhere else on the spare of the moment," he said. And then: "How are the boys?"

She was quick to come back on that one, a hint of venom, protective. The dope smoking wastrels were always her darlings. "Do you care?"

He had to think about this, had to test himself deep inside. He cared, yes, of course. It would have troubled him to think they were hurting, but they had long ago rejected his protection, nor did they need it, since his boys were now men, and nothing he'd said to them over their adult years had made any difference to how they saw him. And they saw him as a knob.

They smoked weed in his Summer house, Dammit!

Like he couldn't smell it on them.

Little Bastards!

"I heard they were working," he said. "Big turn up, that. Thought they'd never leave home."

"Thanks to Richard,..."

She bit her lip as if to pull back the first mention of his name: Richard, the bat wielder, the sneak thief who was shagging her. Kathleen lowered her eyes a fraction, a hint of her vulnerability, of her guilt at daring to break the boredom of her marriage to this dry and dusty accountant by having an affair with a more red blooded man.

Was Finn about to take advantage, come back at her with angry thrusts? No, it was too late for that.

"Ah, yes,... Richard," he said. "I suppose I should be grateful,.. am grateful actually,..."

Funny thing to say Finn: *grateful?*

But yes, Finn was grateful, for giving his lads their start in life - it was a weight off his mind, and his heart. If they screwed it up it was down to them, but at least they'd had their start. "Though our last meeting didn't go all that well," he said.

Kathleen picked up on the conciliatory tone, offered then her own spin on it: "He's very sorry, by the way, about,..." she indicates her temple, puckers her face a little. "You know?"

"Easy mistake to make. I should be glad he called an ambulance instead of just leaving me to bleed to death on the parquet floor."

"You didn't press charges."

"It was,... a misunderstanding. No point."

No, that would have been vindictive, and Finn,... Finn had wanted only to get back to his real life, in Carrickbar.

What?

"So," he said. "Are you and he?..."

"Living together." She gave a pitying smile - so far was he from any comprehension of her lifestyle now. "When our schedules coincide," she said. "I have a flat in Paris. Business is moving there now, what with coming out of Europe and everything. Richard's in Frankfurt mostly, and for the same reasons."

"Nice," said Finn.

Actually it sounded awful, to be no more than a small piece of a global machine, all be it very well paid for one's immense personal inconvenience. But it seemed a superficial way of life, unanchored, loveless.

Wait: she had a flat in Paris? Since when? Corporate pad, he supposed, all paid for.

"I'd no idea, Kathleen."

"I know. But we've been so far apart for years, Finn, it didn't seem like it was any of your business."

He felt the sharpness in that one, shuddered a little. None of his business? "I can understand your thinking that. You've been on the rise for a long time - spending such a lot of time away,... it's a whole different life, the corporate jet-set."

"Could have been you too," she said. "You turned that City job down. Could have been the making of you."

Finn was surprised she remembered that, because he'd forgotten it, never taken it seriously, the business card of a passing wide-boy at a party she'd dragged him to: *"So you'll call me, Finn, yea?"*

Finn had not called him. The man had seemed not to exist in any reality Finn understood, unable to tell Finn exactly what it was he did, other than he was something big in recruitment, a job that involved recruiting others into,... well,... recruitment - an odd, circular, dozy, dreamlike, useless bullshit of a job. It was the same week Carina had told him of a girl, patient of hers, who had jumped to her death from a railway platform.

Finn had blinked, the slick, ugly smear of a man had disappeared and he had not thought of him since, but he had often thought of the girl.

"I was never suited to it," he said. "Wouldn't have lasted five minutes in that kind of work."

Kathleen nodded. It was true, Finn was not suited to it. He was known even to shirk meetings that meant travelling only into London for the day, let alone anywhere further afield. She'd thought he was going places when she'd met him, but then he'd seemed to run out of steam.

It was the health service, she supposed. Always the need to measure yourself and find yourself failing. In a tickbox culture, the trick was to be the one setting the targets, otherwise it was bound to affect your morale, grind you down. She pitied him, but not too much. He could have moved on, moved out, moved up.

Like her.

"So, are you,.. still fiddling with your little watches?"

Ah, condescending now.

Cute.

He nodded. "Yes, I'm still doing that."

"And are you seeing anyone?"

More like it, Kathleen.

Finn wasn't sure if he should tell her, wasn't entirely sure he could trust her that far, that even though it was she who'd first taken a lover, taken one possibly years ago, she wouldn't suddenly introduce a slick suited divorce lawyer, and make out it was he who'd started it. But Hell, who cared? He nodded, and from her expression he could tell she was surprised. He allowed himself a moment of satisfaction in that, but he also realised he didn't know Kathleen at all. She was a stranger, grown, changed - a powerful, articulate influencer of events, and such people are useful when they're right, dangerous when they're wrong.

"It's that woman at the hospital isn't it?" she said. "Richard told me about her. The psychiatrist. Good choice, Finn."

Vindictive again? Good choice? On hand to deal with your mental weaknesses, Finn?

"Carina? No. Carina's always been a good friend, a good listener, but we've never seen each other in that way." Strange, thought Finn, conscious he was actually lying. Clearly he *had* thought of Carina that way, just not allowed himself to act on it. "It's someone else I met, just recently. After I,... well, found out about you and,... you know,... Richard."

"I see. Like a rebound thing?"

How could she be so calm about this? So analytical, so,... fucking wrong!

"Rebound, you say? I don't know. She was kind to me. Look, I've not weathered the world as well as you, Kathleen. I've not adapted to it in the same way. I can't do what you're doing. I can't surf these waves of periodic devastation that Capitalism trails in its wake."

"But you either surf them Finn, or you become one of the little people. You think it's bad right now? Have you any idea what the world will be like in another ten years? You need money. Lots of it. It'll be like the States here soon."

Finn needed no lectures on the structured decline of western civilisation in general or the health service in particular, and had a fair idea of where we were heading, yes.

"I'm sorry,... for just running out like that," he said, eventually.

Was he? Sorry? Of course he was, but that didn't alter the fact of its absolute necessity.

Kathleen's expression tightened. "Hardly noticed," she said. "That goes for the boys too. Hardly noticed. So, it was this other woman all the time then?"

"No, like I said. I've only recently met her. And we didn't,... you know,... not until after I'd found out about you and,..." He sighed. Was he making any sense? Did any of this really matter now? "I mean you and Richard." Why was he speaking like he was still apologising? And Finn didn't want to dwell on the subject of Kathleen and Richard, or the reasons for it. "I went,... to find some space. That's all."

"You'll forgive me if I find that hard to believe."

"Oh?"

"You being spontaneous."

"Okay,..."

"But don't worry, I'm not going to make an issue of it. I really can't be bothered."

She was growing tired now. Losing focus, losing her magnanimity. He needed a change of subject. He'd no intentions of explaining himself to Kathleen, not about him and Hermione, when for such a long time he'd hardly existed at all. "Why don't we rent the house out?" he said. "We could get a thousand a month for it."

Kathleen wasn't impressed. "That's nothing, Finn. A thousand a month? What can anybody do with a thousand a month?"

Well, you could live for the rest of your life on it, he thought - indeed, for many nowadays, that would seem like a fortune.

"As a return on the investment it's actually not bad," he said. "More than you'd get with it sitting in the bank." But since when had he reverted to being an accountant?

"All right," she said. "Rent it, sell it, I don't care. But you sort it out, okay? I really can't be bothered."

"The lads will need to clear their stuff."

"Yes, well,... you know what they're like, so good luck with that one."

Hmm,... valid point, Kathleen. It might take years, disposing of his old life. Easier to move back to Aylesbury then, get himself a proper job as an accountant, mow his grass of a weekend, polish the car like everyone else, the middle class suburban dream - the one that ended in 2008.

No, don't talk like that Finn. You can still do it, you and Hermione, together! But Hermione was the Sea View Cafe, perched on the edge of nowhere, she was two fingers jerked at oblivion. Hermione was not a suburban housewife. She'd already told him that. If he wanted to be with her, he'd have to jerk two fingers at oblivion as well.

"Can't imagine them working," he said, almost fondly. "The boys, I mean."

Kathleen didn't care if he could imagine it or not. She was growing bored and more sour by the second. And she was stealing a look at her watch. It was a designer thing, generic quartz movement, Gold, blingy, real diamonds no doubt - pure statement though, no character, no heritage.

Finn sighed. Time to wrap things up.

"Okay," he said. "I'll sell the house." It was probably best, he thought. "We'll dissolve our joint investments, share the money. I'll let you have my address, my email. We'll,... keep in touch. If you want to move things along with Richard, let me know and we'll go for a divorce. If the boys crash and burn they'll have to bunk with you. I'm living in a very small house and there's no room for them, nowhere for them to smoke their weed."

Woa, Finn!

His hands were shaking, so he slid them under the table. He'd met Kathleen in his twenties, and soon he would be in his fifties. That was a big part of his life, a part which, like the world of his childhood, had started out in earnest but ended in ruin. Hadn't it? No, not ruin exactly. Yes, it had all fallen apart, everything they'd built, but did it have to be anyone's fault? What if it had fallen apart because that was the only thing it could do? No sense lamenting what could not be helped.

Kathleen! How could she appear so unemotional? He supposed it was because she'd already moved on.

Well, so had he, hadn't he?

"I'm proud of you, Kathleen."

Oh? Peculiar thing to say, Finn, under the circumstances?

"I mean it," he said, seeing the terse wrinkle between her eyebrows. "And I wish you well."

He wanted her to say the same about him. It would have meant a lot, but he knew she couldn't, knew at best he puzzled her, at worst she thought him weak.

"I'm sorry, about,... well about Richard," she said. "About deceiving you,... and all that."

An apology, then? There! And better than nothing, though grudgingly given, and through tightened lips as well, Finn.

"I'm happy you're with someone, really," she went on. "I don't like to

think of you being alone, stuck up, well, wherever it is you're living now. And so far away from London - I mean, what are you thinking?"

"Well, I never had much use for London, Kathleen."

"No, I suppose not. And you were always too closed up. You need someone to take you out of yourself. That was never going to be me." She looked around. Time was up. "Better go, I suppose, before some retarded granny bangs the Merc with a trolley."

He gave her a card with his address on it. "This is me now."

"Carrickbar?

Where the hell is that? Finn, are you sure you know what you're doing? You had a good job, a decent salary. You could have moved on up, not moved on down, all the way to,...

Where was Carrickbar again?

She'd have to look it up.

But could she really be bothered?

What she didn't realise of course was there was a future existing somewhere where she came downstairs one morning to find Finn dead, sitting in a gassed out car in the garage. How good was that? She might have found it easy to move on from such a tragedy,.. a different matter for Finn of course.

Another future, less certain, but altogether more hopeful,...

Was this one.

Should he tell her he loved her? It didn't seem appropriate, but seeing her now, even like this, so aloof and business like, he knew he loved her - ached with a tenderness and a deep concern she be all right in the world, that she be happy. But love was also about the choices we make, that we could love together or love apart and, incredibly, it seemed we could love more than one person, equally, just not in the same place and at the same time. That was the lesson of his middle years, that there were no unique soul-mates, and it was pointless dreaming of one. Soul-mates were chosen, nurtured, tended like flowers in the garden of love, and they could whither if neglected.

And he had neglected Kathleen.

He chose not to see her out, to stand and wave her off from the carpark, just rose as she rose, then sat back down and watched her go, watched also the eyes of other men as they tracked her. A beautiful woman, still, and a confident demeanour. They did not press hands, nor kiss, nor even lock eyes one last time. They parted as former colleagues who no longer had any business to transact.

He wanted her to succeed. There was a safety for her in that, but the world she was chasing was inhabited by people rendered feral by a culture of ingrained avarice. Kathleen was not like that, not really. She had liked roses once, breathed their scent and closed her eyes, intoxicated by beauty. He took a sip of his scummy coffee. Yes, yes,... he worried about her. But how many women was it safe, or indeed sensible for a man to worry about?

He took another sip, then spat it back into the cup, refused to swallow any more of the inferior offerings of the world. When it came to coffee, and other things of course,... it was Hermione who was the more immediately genuine, entirely without artifice. That's what he had been needing for so long, what he cherished in her, what he made love to now most nights.

Kathleen cherished other things, and had found them in abundance,... in Richard.

Chapter Sixty One

Lunch time saw Squinty in a backstreet pub just off the city centre. He was comfortable with a pint of Boddies, a plate of pie and chips, and the ingrained scent of a century of fags and booze. It was here, years ago, he'd met by chance the contact who'd introduced him to the easy money of the unofficial import business. He was there again, the contact, the fixer, same guy, holding court now to a big, shaven headed man with a purple scar that ran across his cheek from ear to lip.

They spoke in hushed tones, looked almost comically dangerous, and Squinty felt quietly excited to be in their vicinity, to be holding his own with people like that - really bad, dangerous people. Meanwhile he waited with a studied nonchalance, an air he imagined rendered him invisible to suspicion.

He wasn't expected or anything. You didn't exactly make an appointment with such people. You turned up at their watering holes and things either happened or they did not. All communications were verbal, face to face, or sometimes just a wink and a nod. The contact, the fixer, was a small man in his sixties with a sunbed tan and the shrivelled skin that went with it. His eyes were quick, his mind quicker, and Squinty's presence irritated him.

The client eventually lumbered away, a creature of Frankensteinian proportions, disappeared into the press and the noise of the city. Then Squinty got the enquiring backwards nod, and slid over.

"Still sitting on it?" asked the fixer - meaning the stash of cannabis resin Squinty was hiding.

Squinty felt the irritation in the man now, his excitement turning for a moment to fear. The inference was plain: there were to be no problems, no excuses. He reminded himself people were stabbed and occasionally shot in places like this.

"Sure," he said. "No problem. Ready whenever."

"Heard the cops were watching."

"Aye, they were for a bit. Gone now. Don't worry, they'll never find it. Like I said, ready when you are. Not come to talk about that though."

"Oh?"

"Lookin' for a woman."

The fixer relaxed, he'd been getting some aggravation over delays with the goods and had worried the sight of Squinty now at the watering hole was more bad news. Apparently not. Squinty was cool with it. And the cops had gone. He'd need to check with his other sources for confirmation, but things were looking good of a sudden. Squinty had pleased him. The fixer let slip a smile. "A woman is it?"

Squinty nodded, childlike in his enthusiasm and expectation. "Aye, lookin' for one."

"You've lost one?"

"Nah. I mean I *want* one. You know?"

The fixer shot Squinty a dark look. Hooking up a client with a prostitute was a bit below the fixer's status, unless there were very special requirements and a hugely rich client which Squinty was not. "I don't do that sort of thing, mate. You're better just picking one up off the street."

"Nah, don't mean like that,... not *that* sort of woman. I mean long term, like."

Curious now. "Oh?"

"Wondered if I could buy one. Or employ one, you know? Got cash."

The fixer was definitely interested now. The idea was ridiculous of course. Squinty was not exactly a high roller, but he wasn't short of money either courtesy of his reliability as a smuggler. "You're thinking of setting up in the escort business? Didn't think there'd be much call for that up round your way."

"Nah. Just want a woman for a bit that's all. For me-self. Pretty, like."

"How long's a bit? Week, two?"

"Thinking more like months - six, maybe a year. Dunno, really. See how it goes. Sort of a housekeeper, like. Thought I'd sound you out on the possibilities, that's all."

The man nodded, catching Squinty's drift. This might be interesting, plus there were various angles that could be worked to advantage.

"Okay,... gotacha now. Housekeeper for a nice English Gentleman." The fixer was thinking how he could sell such a proposition to the unfortunate woman he had in mind.

Squinty nodded. "Suppose so, put it like that."

"So, I'm listening. You fussy? How old? You want a virgin? You want black, white, brown?"

"White," said Squinty, as if he'd settle for anything else. "Dark hair. Not too young. Middle thirties maybe. Tops. Good looking mind. Already got me a dog. Don't want another one." He cracked a smile, but the fixer didn't reciprocate - he was too busy working the angles.

"English speaking?"

"Not fussed. Not interested in speaking to her. She'll get the drift soon enough."

At last the solution came to him and the fixer laughed. Squinty grinned. It was good to be well thought of amongst such people, but the fixer was thinking more that Squinty wouldn't last five minutes in the city. Still, he was reliable and charming in his way, and of course potentially useful. The smuggling of people into slavery was switching away from the Channel ports to the quieter spots of the west coast, and Squinty might be able to help with that. He knew boats and had a gruff kind of courage, but the rumour was he'd need some persuading to enter the deeper waters of the black economy.

So, he wanted a woman. A pretty one. But the kind of woman he wanted was rarely for sale. If you purchased a woman, you purchased her passport, became her agent, her pimp, whatever. That was simply how it went, and Squinty wasn't a big enough fish for such a proposition. And if you became an agent or a pimp you had other things to worry about too, like turf wars and getting stuck with a knife between your ribs. And if you owned a woman, she took some licking into shape, some time and effort on a man's part before she'd make him good money on the street, so you didn't go loaning them out as housekeepers earning less than minimum wage.

Except,...

"There may be something I can do. Got some fresh girls come off the boat this week. Eastern Europeans. Big tits,.. blondes, brunettes, you name it,.. real beauties. How about you look after one of them for a bit?"

Squinty felt a shudder of excitement at the description. "Was hoping it'd be the other way round - her lookin' after me, like."

"Sure, whatever."

"How much we talkin'?"

"Well,... let's not worry about the money just now. Let's say you'd be doing certain people a favour if you took one of these girls under your wing for a bit."

"Don't know about that. I was thinking more I'd want to own her - you know, passport, papers everything."

Hmm, Squinty wasn't as stupid as he looked. The fixer pretended to think about it. "Well,... maybe we could work something out along those lines later on. But there's no sense tying yourself down to a woman you might get bored with is there? Come six months time, and you don't own her, you can trade her in for a different model. No paperwork, no problem, see?"
Squinty had to admit this made more sense, and since his ultimate aim was to win Hermione anyway, he'd not yet addressed the question of what became of this half-way girl afterwards. Couldn't exactly chuck her in the sea. No, he wasn't sure how it was going to work exactly, but then he'd found most things in life were a matter of muddling through.
"She'd definitely be up for it, though? I mean,... you know,... *anything*?"

"Oh sure. All these girls are hungry for it. They see a wealthy, good looking gentleman like yourself, Mr Mull,... Mullroony,..."

"Mulligan."

"Mulligan, I mean,... well they're thinking maybe if I play my cards right,..."

Sure she'd be up for it. Even the most innocent girl could be persuaded along the path of depravity, with the right incentive. And Squinty looked

the sentimental type, so get him sentimental, get him attached. *'You want to own her, Squinty, papers and all? Sure - you just do this thing for us and you get her papers.'*

The fixer wrote an address down, slid it under Squinty's nose. A girl who knew where her loyalties lay might just enable this chump to be reeled in a bit further, landing a man with a boat and a knowledge of the sea good and proper at a time when such men were worth getting one's claws into.

"Memorise this," he said. "I'll make some calls. Be there in an hour."

Squinty nodded. It was going to be easier than he thought. "Pretty, mind," he said. "Good body. Slim. Good arse on her. Dark hair. And white."

The fixer shrugged as if such girls were ten a penny. "Sure. No problem. I know just the girl."

Squinty felt a rush. An hour and he'd be on his way back to Carrickbar with a woman in the passenger seat, a fresh young woman he could do anything with, and she'd not cost him a penny. The fact of the latter did give him pause. After all, what might the shady ones want in return? But he was doing certain people a favour, the man said, which surely put them in his debt and not the other way round. And anyway, just wait until Hermione saw him with another girl eating out of his hand – she'd soon change her tune.

You really think so Squinty?

Yes, he thought so.

But then like all men, straight thinking, and above all *cautious* thinking, did not apply when women were involved.

Chapter Sixty Two

Hermione did not like it that Finn had gone away. He'd told her over dinner at the little house on Elm street, and when she'd asked him why, he'd said he had to see his wife.

"To sort things out," he told me.

"But this sounds promising, Hermione."

Helena is warm coated, fur hatted, the fur and hair tossed by a boisterous wind coming off the sea. She has her arm in Hermione's as they walk along the beach. She's feeling stronger and steadier, especially like this, linked up, and she's not felt a spasm from her back in days. They are walking slowly, like lovers, she's thinking, and the thinking of it pleases her.

Two women, beautiful, and no need for a man, because they have each other!

Perhaps this is the future of the species, Helena. And if you have need of penis, you can simply borrow one.

Finns's perhaps?

It's a strange way of thinking, obviously, since Hermione has Finn, and Helena loves Finn also, yet is able to ignore the fact because she cannot help but think of all men in terms of her husband. Thus she seals herself off from the misogynistic myth of mankind, over-paints it with a case study in reverse gendered misogyny, and fantasies of love between women.

Or something of the sort.

For now there are only Wednesday afternoons when they can walk, before the thin northern light thickens quickly to a cold darkness once more, but come spring and summer there will be evenings too. Helena has already hinted in anticipation of this, and Hermione has said it will be pleasant, to walk, to relax after work, also good for Helena to get more exercise.

Helena doesn't care for the sound of exercise, but the thought of Hermione's exercised and toned body intrigues her. Perhaps if Hermione were to show it to her, she might want one of her own.

Yes, there is a physicality to this growing curiosity.

But would she want Hermione's body in that way? Is it really like that between them? How does one test it, without embarrassment?

"Oh, I don't know, Helena. What's he see in me anyways?"

"You already ask me this. I must spell it out? You have body to die for and you are always horny."

Hermione protests with a porcine snort, and a tug on Helena' arm. "But,... he'll get fed up with that. Six months? A year? Then he'll realise his mistake, comin' 'ere, and get himself some other high powered job down south. Then it's goodbye Minny and goodbye Carrickbar."

"You are thinking too far ahead. You are jealous of wife. You think they are now making love, making up for past neglect on both sides. But I see no reason for suspicion. Has she not already discarded him? He is putting down roots here. Untangling his finances, like the careful accountant that he is. And he is a good man, Hermione, and he is coming to us. I have already fixed this. We have hooked him. Now we reel him in. But carefully. For sure he can be a slippery fish, this one."

"Coming to *us?"*

"Well,... to you of course. Mainly. But I would still like to borrow him for odd jobs, and on the occasions when a husband is convenient. And as a father to Kyle of course. I thought we had already agreed this. I will not embarrass you in this matter, nor I'm sure will Finn. But a little variety is good for a man, no?"

"You still on those pain killers?"

"I finished weeks ago. I am not crazy any more. Serious."

"Well,... serious, you can't have him. Not 'till I'm finished with him."

Helena smiles. "There, already you have regained possession of your man. Who cares what he sees in you? Men are a mystery, to themselves and to us."

Hermione laughs, holds a little tighter onto Helena's arm. Helena has a way of saying just the right thing, even if she does sound like she’s off

her head all the time. And she wouldn't mind sharing Finn a little - not in every way of course. But she still can't quite bring herself to believe Finn is coming back.

He's been away for three days now.

Where's he sleeping?

Helena takes a deep breath. The sea air intoxicates her. "I have a good feeling this morning," she says. "It is not so cold now. Soon the winter will pass and we shall be wearing our bikinis again."

"Case you hadn't noticed we're into April next week, and still bloody freezing. Not getting me into no Bikini this far North. It's never been that warm in Carrickbar, least not while I've been here. And I'm 'specially not wearing one with Squinty Mulligan pervin' round every corner."

"I tell you, we fix him."

Helena feels the chill penetrating her coat. They've been walking for half an hour, sauntering north, up the beach. The weather's been dry and the wind is picking up a haze of pale sand, running it into the dunes, the lyme grass sending up a brittle hiss. She pauses, feels a moment of fatigue, of dizziness. Enough exercise! Time to turn around, time for coffee in the conservatory, and chit-chat, if she can coax Hermione across the threshold. But Hermione is always busy these days, always rushing back to the Sea View, where Helena imagines cosy tete-a-tetes with the sweet little Munchkin, Anica.

"Haven't worn a Bikini myself for long time," she says.

"Don't see why not," says Hermione "You still got the figure for it."

"No, I am pigs ear these days for Bikini wear."

"You mean that scar thing? Bet it's not so bad as you're makin' out."

"You want to see? I show you later. Maybe it's not so bad, but it is imperfection, and though we are all imperfect, we pretend opposite. We pretend perfection. This is why we fear old age and death."

"I know. Look,... there's no need to be that way. Not with me. What I mean is,... you can be yourself with me, Helena. If you can remember

what that is."

"Oh? I thank you. Also, you must also not be afraid to be yourself with me. Yet you are the same, I think,... afraid of discovering who you are. Or of others discovering you. I can't decide which it is."

"How so?"

"Starched, fastened up, disguised. You put on strong mask when I know there must be much in you deserves sympathy and shoulder for cry."

"Maybe. Don't expect shoulder for cry from you though."

"Oh? But is this not what friends are for?"

"I guess. But you're fierce, Helena. Pragmatic. Hard as nails. You said it. And you've survived so much more than me. Had your entire country come rainin' down on your head. Nothing I've suffered comes even close to that. You'd just think I was pathetic, spilling my life's story. You'd simply tell me to pull myself together."

"Hard as nails? I don't want to be hard as nails with you. I will never tell you to pull yourself together. So,... are we friends or not?"

"'Course we are."

"Good. You want cry with me, is secret between us. Absolute."

"Same if you want to cry with me."

Helena thinks on this. Are they really talking about crying, or something else. Is this about being open and tender with each other. But only lovers do that. The thought confuses her, and not for the first time in Hermione's company.

She tosses it off with a shrug. "Fuck this. I'm tired. We go back now."

"Okay."

They pause a while, gazing north. Over the haze of blown sand there rises the faint outline of a long, mountainous horizon.

"Lake District." says Helena. "I know nice hotel there. Ambleside. Nice

restaurant. Much in way of pretentious luxury. We go. Pamper weekend. I pay."

"What? Well, sounds lovely, but I'm no lady of leisure like you. I got me a cafe to run."

Helena pouts, disappointed. "But you have Anica to help. And you are always singing her praises."

"I am?"

"Sure. She is daughter for you. I understand."

Hermione had thought it was a secret, the daughter thing. "Em,... Annie's a good girl. But I can't leave her on her own for a whole weekend - café gets busy now. Wouldn't be fair."

"You deserve time off."

"Not when my business is just gettin' goin' I don't."

"You see? How I plead with you, Hermione? This is not hard as nails. I am soft woman for you. It is Hermione who plays the man. Hermione who plays always the trousers with me."

"Shut up with your trousers. You're not going all mad Dyke on me again, are you?"

"And she chastises me. This is so exciting."

"Will you stop flirting with me?"

"No. I enjoy flirting with you. And in life there are so few real pleasures, Hermione. We should enjoy them wherever we find them."

"Thought so. You're going all pervy again. I've a good mind to take you up the dunes and give you a good seein' to. That'll shut you up. Don't think I don't know how. I've been lookin' it up."

Helena lets slip a cheeky smile. "But this is not inviting, Hermione. No, come. We have coffee at my place,... and if you are still offended by my flirting, you can teach me a lesson there. Kyle works 'till four. We have home alone."

Hermione hesitates. "Oh?"

"You are too busy. Again?" There's a challenge in Helena's tone, then a cheeky twinkle in her eye. "You can demonstrate to me what you have been looking up."

Hermione will not have her courage tested, nor will she be made to squirm in embarrassment. Helena knows this, and Hermione knows Helena knows she knows this. "I'm not too busy. Coffee will be nice. Just keep your fuckin' hands to yourself, okay?"

"But it's you who teases me with your girl-on-girl researches. I say nothing. Am innocent entirely in such matters. But certainly not complaining."

Hermione shakes her head, sighs. "Finn warned me 'bout you."

"Oh?"

"Says you're dangerous. But he always says it with a smile on his face."

"He does?" Helena takes this as a compliment. "It excites him, danger. But he also has good sense, and knows better than to play with fire. You complete him, I will consume him. I'm sorry, Hermione. It is great pleasure to be friends. I will never risk that by fucking with you."

"Ah well, there you go. Spoken like a man. Build a girl up, then set her down with a bump."

Helena laughs. "Oh,... I'm sure Finn keeps you warm enough."

" 'Course he does. He's lovely, Helena. Look,.. he gave me this watch for Valentines. Keep forgetting to wind it though. Bit old fashioned, like my dad's, but kind of pretty, don't you think? Said he'd put it together from bits and bobs of other watches. Isn't that clever?" She offers Helena her arm to see the watch. Helena takes her hand, strokes the back of it unconsciously.

"Finn has made this? Men are strange creatures - they like to build the world with one hand and destroy it with the other. Is he a father to you, Hermione? Is that it?"

Hermione withdraws her hand thoughtfully, still the feel of Helena's

fingertips sending shivers up her arm. "No, it's not like that. He's not that much older'n me. I can't resist mending things neither. Bit like Finn with his little watches. But it's people I work with. We both can't help it. And he needed fixing up."

"Fix me up too?"

"Difficult to know what makes you tick, Helena. But you need anything from me, you've only to ask, okay?"

"My problem is pride and the courage to be asking. You will have to guess what it is I need. Always."

"Yea well, worried I might get that bit wrong."

"Who cares? You get it wrong, is moment of embarrassment only, brushed away by embrace of friendship. But you, Hermione,... who fixes you up?"

"Oh,... me? I'm all right. Got everything I want."

"But they say happiness isn't getting what you want. It's wanting what you have?"

"We talkin' about Finn now? Think we've already worked out I'm wantin' him all right, so don't you go getting any hopes up. Question is how long he's going to be wantin' me. It's how all my relationships end, Helena. And it's always my fault, wonderin' what others see in me. Least with Squinty it's obvious, and you got to admire him for that."

"No, we admire nothing in Squinty Mulligan. This is the only thing that's obvious about him." Helena sighs. "I have always known this about you. And always it has irritated me."

"Oh? What's that then?"

"Lack of esteem for self. It is good we are friends because I have always had more esteem for self than is good for me, so I will share some with you. Now,... I'm getting puffed, and here we are at the steps already. I will need to sit when we get in, the cold air makes me dizzy. You will make coffee for us?"

"Sure, but like I said just,.."

"I know,... I promise. I keep hands to myself. Just help me get up these steps first."

Chapter Sixty Three

Finn rang Carina to let her know he was coming. There was no reply, so he left a message on the machine. He was thinking he'd probably sleep at his own place tonight, head home to Carrickbar, and to Hermione, in the morning. But Carina was only twenty minutes away so it made sense to call around anyway, even though she wasn't answering the 'phone.

As he drove, he tried to come up with a plan for his return to Carrickbar, but found he couldn't think too far ahead. Like Carina said, plans were for other people, while the rest of us just made things up as we went along, went with our gut, our emotions. And his were confused right now, his instinct being to do nothing until things were clearer.

But especially he should do nothing about the campsite.

Sure, the more he thought about it, the less like a good idea it sounded, only it was undeniable that the thought of it excited him a little. It could easily end up being an expensive hobby, and would be up for sale again within the year, plus a half dozen Glamping Pods - or whatever the damned things were called.

Or worse, Finn, it might be a success and it would tie you down to Carrickbar for ever!

What?

Isn't that what I want? To settle!

And if Carrickbar really was where he intended settling, then Hermione was right, he had to do something with his time, and had he forgotten the reactions of Lionel and Annie, that the campsite was something good and positive, at a time when the all pervading mood of the country was distinctly spooked?

Finn had the money. And it would make a difference, to his life, and to Kyle,... and to Anica. It would be one in the eye to the zeitgeist that was oppressing them, like Hermione and the Sea View, it would be somewhere to make a stand. No need to bend over and take it up the arse all the time,...

Come on, Finn! Fight back, man!

Strange thoughts.

Strange too that he was nervous about calling on Carina. He remembered his Christmas there, confused and with a sick headache for weeks, the shock of Kathleen's casual infidelity, and Carina's kindness, and her clever, sassy tongue whip-lashing him any time he showed signs of self pity.

Kathleen,...

There was still some guilt there.

Well, of course there was - guilt he'd not mended what had needed mending at a time when it had first broken and was still mendable. But when had that been, exactly? Was it a year ago? Two years? Ten? Was it that time when the boys were still at school, when just getting them out of the house of a morning had been exhausting. Had he and Kathleen lost each other then? Was it right to blame the children for being more of a distraction than they'd bargained for. Was it actually the children at all? Were some couples not just meant to be a temporary thing anyway?

Have kids, get them on their feet, then split?

Carina again: He thought of the years he'd felt secure in the sanctity of their semi-secret friendship. He thought of the times he'd imagined taking her as a lover, or at least seeing how she felt about that, and then feeling guilty he would even consider betraying Kathleen, when all along Kathleen had been,... well,...

We know all of that Finn,...

Of course even if Finn had lost his head and declared his desire, Carina would have saved them both in any event by pointing out the absurdity, and the emotional instability from which Finn's feelings had arisen. She had always been reliable in that way, at subverting disaster. That's why he trusted her, why he'd trust her even if she was wrong. But for now all that mattered, he told himself, is she was in trouble, and, though Finn could not see clearly what he could do about any of that, he could at least make sure she knew he was on her side.

The approach to Carina's house was bumpy, remote, the setting amid meadows and woodland serene and fondly remembered from his time

there over Christmas. But as he approached the house, his nervousness became palpable. What if it was inconvenient? What if she was seeing someone? I mean, *you know*, actually *seeing* someone? Is that why the 'phone was off the hook?

That would be awkward, and embarrassing, and Carina would notice his embarrassment and want to know why, and then she'd know Finn had long harboured fantasies about her.

Well it's true Finn, you have!

But if that was so, she already knew, and had *always* known, and that's just the way it is with men and women, and you either choose to act upon it or you stick to your reasons why not.

Her car wasn't outside the house, so maybe she wasn't at home after all. Or maybe it was in the garage. He knocked, softly at first, timidly, as if afraid she'd answer and he wouldn't know what to say, and he'd be embarrassed she could see right through him. Well, he'd always known that, but what he didn't want her to see suddenly was this thing he'd never been embarrassed about before.

Whatever it was.

When there was no reply, he tried again, a piece of him reluctant, but another, greater piece, forcing the courage to try harder, louder, sending up this time a couple of rooks from the trees by the meadow. He waited a while, his heart rocking him - the air heavily scented with leaf-mould, and the earth warming for spring,... and something else, something,...

What was that?

It was alien, acrid, unwholesome,...

Why the nerves, Finn?

It was through the stillness then he heard the burbling of an engine, slow, just ticking over somewhere, Carina's car - her old Porsche having a distinctive tone to it. But the only place it could be was in the garage, and the garage door was closed. Finn felt something inside of him break open, memories of a conversation with Hermione and the way her father had chosen to die, memories too of the stark choices Carina had given him: heart attack, stroke, mental break down, a gas

filled car,... or,..

He ran.

Something smokey was seeping through the crack underneath the garage door, and there came the definite burble of a car within. He yanked the handle - it wasn't locked and when the door swung up he was struck by a wave of toxic fumes that scalded his eyes and his throat and sent him staggering backwards. He could make out the rear of Carina's, car before a wall of tears took his vision, and he had to duck clear while he took a deep gasp of clean air. Then he held his breath and went back in.

The gas filled car!

It was an efficient and relatively painless means of self-annihilation. Finn had read the statistics on it, appalled the biggest killer in society was not cancer, not heart disease, but simply the desire no longer to live. It suggested the world we had built was not to the liking of most people, and that didn't make sense at all.

But Carina?

He fumbled his way along the car, his eyes burning, found the door handle. The door opened and he felt inside, fearing to light upon her body, but there was nothing. He leaned in further, checked the passenger seat. The car was empty. He emerged, choking, wiping his eyes on his sleeves, only then to see her standing in the yard, and only then vaguely through his tears:

"Finn? Oh,... what? Did I leave it running? Honestly! I'm on another planet these days."

He dropped his hands to his knees, coughing, drawing deeply on clean air.

"Wait," she said. "You didn't think?... "

Finn couldn't reply. It was as if he'd run a marathon. He stood with an effort, coughed some more. Carina opened her arms and came to him, wrapped him tight. "You did didn't you? Oh, Finn,... you,... you,... silly moo!"

He was laughing now. She wiped his eyes with the backs of her hands.

"What are you doing here anyway?"

"Just,... thought I'd come over," he said. "See if you were okay."

"Well, I'm fine. All the better for seeing you." And she hugged him then as if, for a moment, she would not let him go.

Chapter Sixty Four

The girl wasn't what Squinty was expecting. She was older than she ought to be for a start, not as old as Maureen, but maybe older than Hermione. She was hardly a girl then, and not looking too clean. She came out of the house in company with the scar-faced man he'd seen with the fixer that morning. He held her tight by the arm as if he expected her to bolt - either that or he didn't know his own strength, because he was clearly hurting her. She had a black eye and a cut lip and a burst nose - injuries, the man explained, in broken English as being the result of walking into a door.

Silly Bitch.

But for all of that, she was dark haired and good looking and a had a peachy arse, and the man said she was up for anything. With her hair cut a bit shorter she'd look the spit of Hermione, at least in the dark, and with just a bit of imagination. As for the damage, it would heal or clean up. Okay, she'd do.

The scar faced man assured Squinty she spoke no English at all.

The street was a mess of beercans and little gas cartridges. A sign fixed to the lamp-post requested residents picked up their dog poo and took it home. None had bothered. There was a burned out car that had been there some days, and most houses were boarded up, the density of overlaying graffiti suggesting years of dereliction. He found it hard to believe anyone actually lived there at all. It had him pining for his little garage by the sea. Sure it was run down, and littered with rusting bits of cars, but it was idyllic by comparison with this. And the stench of the city had him pining for a cleaner air, for the wash of the sea, and the roll of a sturdy little boat on the waves.

It was easier in Carrickbar to forget all this,... rottenness.

In his free hand the scar-faced man carried a small suit-case containing the woman's belongings, he threw it on the back seat of the Landrover and the dog went wild, rocking the vehicle in outrage at the intrusion. Squinty yelled his soothing platitudes and the hound moderated its tone to a throaty growl. The woman was shoved up front, and the man gave a cracked tooth smile as he waved them off - something sinister in it, thought Squinty. He nodded his respects, but something in the man's expression sent a chill through him. In Squinty's moral code, it was okay to pursue a woman doggedly for sex

- that was natural and manly. You could raise your voice to a woman, too, but it was only the lowest sort of man who would ever actually hurt one. And this woman had not walked into a door.

Still, it happened.

"Turned out nice again," he said.

Something told him to get out of the City as soon as he could, before she morphed into a wrinkled old prune, like Maureen, or the man wanted to beat her some more.

He stole furtive glances in her direction. She was a looker, in a mature sort of way, and she'd clean up, but was clearly too worldly to let him clean her up himself - too worldly to let him get away with other things. He'd have to turn up the charm a bit.

"'I'm hopin' you got somethin' nice in that bag love 'cos to be honest what you're wearin' right now, you look like shit."

No, charm, was not his forte.

She had on an old pair of baggy jeans and a white tee shirt that was stained with blood from her nose and lip. Squinty offered her a handkerchief which she threw back at him, and with every testing bark of the hound, she twitched, and Squinty shouted at the dog, which made her twitch even more.

It was half an hour to the M6, half an hour before he realised he didn't know her name.

"John," he said, patting his chest. "Me John."

It sounded stupid, coming out like that. Like: Me Tarzan! He looked over but she had her face against the glass now, and though her eyes were open, she gave the impression of having closed down her awareness.

"Me John," he said, patting his chest a little louder this time.

She shrugged. Maybe she'd understood, maybe not, or maybe she just didn't care what he was called. Clearly there was a way to go in teaching her other things if she was struggling with names. How did she expect to get on over here without speaking a word of English?

And what the Hell was he supposed to do with her? He smiled - *some things don't need much explaining, do they Squinty?*

Pity though, she looks so sour - it would take courage to bring that one up. Still, the sourer the better for what he had in mind - nothing like a woman looking like she's being taught a lesson. But without *actually* hurting her, you know. Just spurring her on, like.

Still, it troubled him she was upset, troubled him she'd been bleeding. Perhaps he'd,... rescued her? Sure,... that worked. He'd *rescued* her. She'd be safe with him, just so long as she did what she was told, and could be persuaded to be nice to him.

"I ain't goin' ta hurt you, love," he said.

Well, not hurt exactly, but she'd be squealing for sure at some point, if she knew what was good for her.

And they all knew what was good for them in the end, eh Squinty?

An hour of motorway and he was coming up on Forton Services, dying for a pee, so he pulled off. Maybe he could get burgers while he was at it. She looked like she could do with feeding up a bit. They could start on the domestic stuff tomorrow. But he couldn't take her into the Services looking like that, blood all down her front - attract attention, that would.

"You stay 'ere, " he said, then wondered if she'd bolt. But where was she going to go, speaking no English and him her only ride? No, she knew how things stood all right.

The hound growled in warning as if to make up for Squinty's lack of menace. He wondered about putting the dog in front with her, instead of caged at the back, but the dog would have her face off.

Think about it, Squinty! Relax.

Go empty your bladder.

Everything's cool.

He asked if she understood, but she managed only to look hateful.

He left her there, locked the car with a flourish, thinking she'd be too

stupid to work out the doors opened from the inside.

So, quick pee, and a couple of burgers. Sure - be nice to her. Buy her a burger, Squinty!

When he came back, she'd gone.

The dog sat, glad to see him, drooling foolishly, thinking perhaps the burger was its reward for seeing off the intruder. It looked sad when he tossed both onto the seat and stormed away, scanning the crowds, the cars.

What would she do, Squinty?

Where would she go?

Try to hitch a ride?

He ran across to the lorry park, but there was no sign of her. Stupid! She would most likely have crossed over the pedestrian bridge, thinking to hitch her way back southbound. He made it across, barging against the crowds coming the other way. Breathless, he began to search.

Nothing.

Squinty's day had suddenly gone pear shaped.

Okay, so think about it. He'd not paid for the woman, but that didn't mean she was worthless to those who'd loaned her out to him. Or maybe they'd planned it that way, told her to bolt at the first opportunity, then they could say he owed them, but not to worry, that maybe there was some arrangement they could come to, some other way Squinty could pay them back.

He returned to the car with a heavy heart. It was too late now to be thinking this through. Should have thought it through before! What might they ask of him? The last thing he wanted was to get in any deeper with these people. A bit of weed was one thing, but what else might they be smuggling? People? Guns?

She was sitting in the car, having changed her top and cleaned her face in the toilets, and she was brushing out her hair. She'd applied a bit of lipstick, a bit of powder, a dab of perfume - not for him, but for

herself. The dog was calm, having been fed a burger. She saw him coming, gave him a warning flash of her eyes, then tapped her chest.

"Nina," she said. She spoke with spirit and a kind of warning - that she was not to be messed with, a firmness about her - and Squinty felt at once a rush of relief and lust that he mistook for love.

He picked up the other burger as he climbed in. She'd not touched it, assuming perhaps it was his and he handed it to her. She smelled like heaven. "This one's for you, love. Looks like the dog enjoyed mine."

She shook her head, patted her tummy.

"Yea,... right," he said. "Not good for the waistline."

His heart was still thumping. He'd been through every scenario in the space of a moment, and the scenarios had gone from bad to worse. But now everything was back in its place. He took a breath and they pulled away. "Didn't mean it, earlier," he said. "I mean 'bout you lookin' like shit. Don't always mean what I say. And sometimes I do stuff I regret."

He was thinking of Hermione's window now.

Why'd you do that, Squinty?

He shook his head, took a deep breath as they joined the carriageway. No sense in denying it, they were both of them in trouble, her a million miles from home, slaving at the beck and call of crooks posing as employment agents. And him? Well, for all the same reasons as before, but also because added to that now, Squinty was sure he was in love, and that wasn't a good idea with a woman he'd just met, to say nothing of one brutalised and cheated of her liberty like this one.

Nina, she'd said.

Good arse on her. Nice, big pointy tits!

Oh, yes, she'd do.

Chapter Sixty Five

Hermione walks into the conservatory carrying a tray with coffees and biscuits. She's thinking now a pamper weekend in a nice hotel with Helena would be a treat, the two of them oiled up, massaged and lazing by a warm, indoor pool after a good going over by a strapping masseur. Could she perhaps get Kyle to hold the fort with Anica? No, Helena would never go for that. So maybe Finn? Or would the whole thing just be a disaster and she'd return to find they'd burnt the place to the ground, or offended all her customers with bad service and burnt bacon?

Still, it was something to think about, and a weekend out of Carrickbar with Helena would be interesting to say the least. To be the other half of a woman like that, to watch the men watching Helena, knowing they could never have her, because Helena belonged to Hermione, came only for Hermione, all scissored up and sweetly keening.

What? Where did that one come from?

Fuck's got into you Minnie?

Helena is standing, staring out through the glass, her back turned. Hermione sets the tray down. Without a word, Helena lifts the hem of her sweater tugs down the waistband of her jeans. Hermione looks and sees the scar there, an assertive gash across the right of her lower back, cutting a little way into her waist. It's not a pretty thing for sure, a curving crescent and looking like it was sack stitched in a hurry, but neither is it so bad as Helena has made out. But then any mark on a body like that is to be regretted.

"Any interesting tattoos while we're at it?" she asks. Helena makes no reply and Hermione regrets the joke.

No flirting, no joking.

This is serious.

She tries to imagine the noise, the wailing, the squalor, and the blood of the trauma room where Helena was patched up. Something like that, it cannot but create a wedge of silence between people who have not shared it. These are things Helena can never speak of in their fullness, only hint at them by way of apology for being the way she is, leave others to fill the gaps if they want to, and fuck them if they don't.

Healing then is finding the small bridges back into an ordinary life.

Can Hermione be that bridge? And if so why the sexual ambiguity?

Why can they not simply be friends?

Close friends.

Girl friends.

Helena is sensitive about the scar, would one day like to wear a Bikini to the beach, be a girl again, and for sure she still has the figure for it in all other respects. Well so be it, thinks Hermione. But not Carrickbar. They'll go to Spain, assuming Spain's still there, post BREXIT. Long time since Hermione went abroad. Maybe they'll need visas by then?

For Spain!

Weird.

All the old certainties gone now.

Still, Helena says nothing, seems rather to be exposing herself in invitation of some kind of intimacy. Hermione approaches, ventures a palm to Helena's back, feels the heat of her, the scent, touches the pale purple puckers with her fingertips. Helena lets slip a short gasp at contact.

"Sore?" asks Hermione.

Helena shakes her head. No, it is not soreness that makes her gasp. "Hand is cold." But it's not that either.

"Sorry."

Hermione rubs her hands to warm them, then cups a palm over the scar, seals it in warmth as if to heal by magic, to dissolve, to give life. She likes the feel of Helena's waist. Helena closes her eyes, parts her lips, feels the heat penetrating deep and dares to hope. She lets out another sigh, deeper this time, a sigh Hermione recognises from within herself as a longing for something she's not sure she can have.

You and me both, 'darlin.

"Like I said, Helena, it's not so bad. I got a 'pendix scar worse 'n that."

Helena turns then, catches Hermione in an embrace. It's softly manoeuvred, like a secret wrestling trick - and then she holds her gently snug. "You are poor liar, Hermione. You have big nose, like little wooden boy."

Hermione settles into the embrace, into the gentle warmth and scent of Helena, rocks her gently. "Pinocchio? Thanks a lot. Anyway doctors said they'd tidy it up dint they? I mean while they was about that other business. You know?"

Helena shakes her head.

Hermione detects the reluctance again. The fear. "You're still goin' through with it, aren't you?"

"Don't know. How long for our friendship when you are pushing me around in wheelchair, and Finn is carrying me to toilet? You see why I would make threesome with you? I think only of future mobility."

Hermione gives Helena's shoulders a reassuring squeeze, then retreats behind the coffee and biscuits, pours nervously. "But that's not likely, is it?"

"Threesome?"

"Listen, darlin', threesome with me and Finn's unlikely, for sure. You can trust me on that. Okay? But I meant the other,... you know? You know I did. And it's a small risk. They said so."

"But who are they to speak when it is not their risk? Would you not fear also?"

"'Course I would. Anyway, come on. Drink your coffee, and shut up. Finn's Carina says it's got to come out. And that's that."

"Finn's Carina? But she is shrink woman, what she know about fleshy things?"

"She's a medical doctor too, he says."

"She is? This woman astounds me. Pity we cannot lure her to Carrickbar. We need doctor in family. Future is for surviving now, and

doctor is handy." Helena gives a mischievous sparkle. "They looked good together, Shrink Lady and Finn. Perhaps they should marry and we make foursome with them."

"Foursome? Get lost you crazy tart."

"You think? No. For sure, couples are no good any more. They make too small a team for survive shipwreck of European economy."

Hermione laughs, something nervous in it. "Give over. You're doin' my head in. You ever met Carina?"

"Short time only. Perhaps my arrival at Finn's house spoiled their evening. They are both polite about this, but a woman has a feeling when she is intruding. Had I not interrupted, maybe they'd be engaged by now. Finn has nice house by the way. Big, plenty of luxury and modern kitchen fittings."

"Don't! You know how insecure I am about Finn - me talkin' like I'm fresh out of infant-school. And Carina with two flamin' doctorates. Good lookin' is she?"
"For woman of her age yes, for sure. But don't listen to me. There is also something celibate about her. She is like priestess, like sex would be for weakness in this woman, like it would be boring to her. And I'm sure it does not bore Finn. I mean,... it does not bore him, this man who makes you laugh when making love?"

Hermione cracks a shy grin, blushes. "Not so's I'd noticed."

"So you are safe. Just keep him well entertained. Anyway, I like the way you talk, and,..." she takes a breath, hesitates in case Hermione thinks she is flirting again, which she might be, a little, but would still not want to devalue the sentiment: "I like the way you touch me. If you will forgive moment of racism, well meant, you English are afraid to touch, even during sex. First always to pull away when deed is done, but you are different, Hermione. I like this in you."

"Now you're just trying to sweet talk me into bed again. But there's bits of you Helena there's no way I'll ever be touchin'. Okay? And why do you keep taking 'bout sex like you got a one track mind? Change the subject will you!"

Helena thinks on it. *Is she always talking about sex?* Probably. "I will overlook this rebuff for now." she says. "But bed, yes, actually, I am

thinking of it. Sea air has made me heavy with sleep. I am sleeping more in the afternoons, since time in hospital. For an hour or two. I take shower, then lie cosy until three. It gives me energy for when Kyle comes home, wanting food. He is impossible to fill up, you know?"

"I can imagine. It's tiring being around teenagers, int it? Like with Annie,... lovely though,.. I mean,..." Hermione holds back from further talk of Anica. It will be a hard sell, getting Helena to love Anica as Hermione loves her.

Helena reads her mind, smiles, keeps her own council on the subject of Munchkin Anica. "You know," she says. "It is not unusual for women to be in love with women. I am reading about this recently. I do my own researches. It is not lesbian. It is flexible concept. Yes?"

"Will you stop! You're impossible, you know?"

"I make conversation only. Is you who jumps conclusions."

"You askin' me if I'm in love with you?"

Helena nods. "For interest. No sex. Promise."

"Well in that case, 'course I am, you shameless tart."

She nods. "Thought so. Me too, for sure. This is most surprising to me." She sets down her cup, frames a question, but cannot find the voice, scrunches her mouth in frustration, tries again, sighs in defeat. It doesn't take an empath to see how deeply Helena is afraid, but not of love. Helena is definitely not afraid of love.

"So," says Hermione, coming to the rescue. "At what point am I two-timing Finn?"

"Two timing?"

"Cheating. I mean, with us being in love now and everything."

Helena pauses, spaced-out for a moment as if she has not heard, as if she has already moved on to the next mad thing. "Oh? Well of course we would have to sleep together."

"No, girls sleep together all the time. That wouldn't do it."

"Oh? So you permit we sleep together, Hermione?"

"Didn't mean it like that."

"Gift each other orgasms, then?"

"What?"

"You gift me orgasm, and I gift one to you in return. This would be cheating on Finn."

The gift of an orgasm? That old chestnut. Nice one Helena.

Hermione laughs. "Yes, that would definitely be two timing."

"But why? We are girlfriends, yes? Girls share many things men have no concept of. So even this would not be Finn's business. It is girl stuff. How else are we to know if we like it or not?"

"Girl stuff or not, *that* would be different."

"For sure it would." There's a twinkle in Helena's eye that makes Hermione blush.

Helena does not mean any of this - she's playing among the clouds as usual. But her repetition suggests she's intent on exploring it. Hermione sighs. Just because you think a thing, doesn't mean you have to say it out loud all the time. It's a good point though: at what level of intimacy would it be Finn's business to know? Girlfriends discuss many things they would not dream of sharing with their men. But gifting orgasms, as Helena so quaintly put it - that would definitely be Finn's business, and she would have to ask him first, or tell him after.

How would she put it?

Finn, 'darlin, mind if I,...

But think, Minny. *Serious now.* It would destroy him. Playing around the possibilities this way is only possible if you don't bring emotions into it. It would take what little bit of manhood you've thus far managed to restore in this good man and it would thrash it to splinters.

Imagine: marriage blown to Hell, and then his girlfriend turning to

another girl.

No way.

Wake up, Minny!

If only Helena did not cast such a spell!

"You look tired, Helena."

Helena's eyes widen a little in alarm at the thought Hermione might be wanting to go. "My mouth is crazy again. I am not flirting. Promise. Please, don't go yet. We drink coffee, chit-chat of other things. The weather is still cool for time of year, yes?"

"'S all right. I'm not going anywhere. Learnin' to be comfortable with you is a matter of learnin' how to handle you."

"Oh? You think you can handle Helena now?"

"Sure. I reckon you're all talk."

"With most things, possibly. But not all."

"You go have your shower, then get your head down for a bit. I'll,... keep you company if you want. Okay?"

Helena isn't sure she's heard right. "Company? In bed? Together? Head down? I was only joking about sleeping with you."

"Yea well, you and your big mouth. And you weren't jokin'. You were tryin' it on, but in a way that was deniable. Anyway, no, I don't mean *in* it. I mean *on* it. Or better still you in it and me on it. If you want. If,... you like."

Helena nods. "You see? Love between women is much safer. If you were a man you'd definitely want to be in it and pawing at my tits."

"Yea well. You had a dick the size of Squinty's I'd be tempted. But you don't, so bad luck."

"Uggh. This man again. But I'm curious, is Finn so well endowed in dick department?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out."

Helena smirks, accepts the challenge with a twinkle.

"Don't you dare. Now go get your shower 'fore I change my mind."

It's an odd game, Helena allowing Hermione the trousers, when Hermione knows how otherwise assertive and foul-mouthed-shouty Helena can be. But in being with her, she feels her self confidence, her self respect rally as much as when she's with Finn. This is Helena's gift, and a precious, life-giving thing, a thing won only in the private times between them.

Chapter Sixty Six

The meaning of things isn't to be found in studying them, said Carina, nor in thinking about them at all, but more in attaining a state of non-judgemental awareness. Then we see there is no meaning in things themselves, that in seeking their meaning we obscure the formless beauty in them and, through analysis, through over-thinking, we fail to experience love.

"Then there is no meaning?" asked Finn.

"To what?"

"To life. My life. Your life."

"Of course there is."

"Then what?"

Carina looked a little dishevelled - her hair uncombed, more voluminous and more fiery red than Finn remembered from when she was working, from those long budget meetings whose only redeeming feature for Finn had been the presence of Carina herself, the knowledge of her kindness, and that she did not hate him the way everyone else did.

Her blouse was creased and she wore no bra. Her cream suit looked business-like but too well worn and lived-in-comfortable for a hundred quid a head restaurant. Finn had baulked at the idea of dinner in such a place as this, but she'd insisted, claiming her resurrection from the dead, at least in Finn's eyes, was worth splashing out a little on dinner, and she would pay.

"Love," she said.

"Love?"

"We find meaning, redemption, salvation, whatever you want to call it,... in love. Not just the kind you're thinking. I mean not the one-person-bonking-the-other kind. Sometimes we think that's all there is to love, that it's merely the permission to bonk. But that's Eros. I'm meaning more simply *love* - you know? Kindness, compassion. *Agape*."

"Agape?"

"The love of God, Finn. The grace of God. I mean,... without being religious about it. Can you do it? Can you find a way of loving even these tossers in here? Look at them. Given the state of the economy and the number slaving below subsistence levels for tyrannical bastards, many of whom probably frequent pretentious pig troughs like this, there's much in this well polished porcine crowd to hate. But in doing so, do you not also feel,... a little cut off? A little less than human? A little *diminished*?"

"I,..."

Carina had not been drinking, had drunk nothing since the mother of all hangovers some weeks ago. This was Carina sober, incisive, cynical and - for all of her apparent languor - intellectually terrifying.

"I mean, how do we find the love of God in these people, Finn?"

Finn wasn't sure he wanted to. He found their braying and their preening obnoxious, but felt he had to try, if only because Carina had challenged him to do it, and it was always a pleasure to please Carina.

"Em,... I can make a start, I suppose, by understanding their folly, and forgiving it? After all, I used to be one of them."

Carina, smiled indulgently, nodded. "Yes, it's a start. Every couple of generations we make the mistake of worshipping affluence, don't we? But they're just people like anybody else - frail, feeble, stupid. They make mistakes. By the way, you were never one of them, Finn,... or I would have seen no point in rescuing you. I'd've been doing humanity a service by allowing evolution to take it's toll on you."

"That doesn't sound very,... loving?"

"Didn't say I was perfect."

"So, at the risk of fishing for compliments, which is always a dangerous thing where you're concerned, what was my redeeming feature - the one that spared me from your indifference?"

"Oh,... it's hard to say. A mixture of things. Compassion. Humility. And clear signs of distress."

"Well, distress for sure."

Finn scanned the dining crowds. He noted men did not wear ties to dinner any more, unlike Finn who remained always a decade behind fashion. He noted instead they wore hideously pretentious timepieces with designer names, timepieces that would no doubt be thrown away when their batteries ran down. There would be no future niche market on Ebay for such things, unless future generations rediscovered a sense of irony.

Carina watched him watching: "So, what are you thinking?"

He did not want to say he was musing metaphorically on the subject of timepieces. "I'm thinking they're probably thinking more about what they're wearing and what they're eating than about the person sitting across from them."

"Could be. At least I hope they're thinking about what they're eating, considering how much it's costing them."

"Man in the corner, striped shirt. He'd be wearing a medallion thirty years ago. Bulbous wristwatch, glittery, about ten dials on it. Seen those on Amazon. Five hundred quid. And he's waving it about for us all to see."

"So?"

"He doesn't get it. An aspirational timepiece starts at maybe five grand. And classy designs are always understated."

"Wasted on me. Your point?"

"Value. Presence. Self awareness."

"Oohh, I love it when you talk sexy. Tell me more. Share your analysis."

"We're all afraid, aren't we? Afraid that if no one notices us, approves of us, loves us, worships us, we might as well not exist. But in trying so hard, like him, to prove we're worth something, we're apt to make ourselves look a little stupid, or just annoying."

"Ah yes, we're most of us pulled away from the tit too soon, and spend the rest of our lives greedy to reconnect. There's much wisdom in that.

Not everyone has it in them to be self contained, and content with the little nourishment their world seems to offer."

"Like you?"
She avoided the question, took hold of his fingers, pulled his hand towards her across the table and pushed his sleeve up to reveal,....

His watch.

"Okay, what does this one say about you?"

"Em,... old, slightly knackered on the outside. But still ticking. And reliable,... I hope."

"Worth much?"

"More than his. But not aspirational. Purely vintage. Collectable by those who appreciate the quality of bygone times."

"Ah, there you see? We are the worst kind of snobs, you and I. Conceited, aloof, viewing life from a stratospherically intellectual perspective. Plus the nostalgia angle isn't helpful. Your watch says you are not of his world, Finn, or worse, that you are of a world that never existed."

"It does? I don't know about the intellectual perspective. But I'm sharp enough to know you ducked the question. So,... what about you, Carina?"

"What about me?"

"Aren't you lonely?"

"Lonely?" She smirked, but it was a defence and he could see he had her cornered. And it shocked him, the realisation, that Carina was lonely. How could he allow that?

"Is there no one?" he asked, realising even as he said it, he rather hoped there wasn't, that she was above the banality of relationship. Unless it was the relationship with him.

What?

Her eyes slid away. She was uncomfortable, and it surprised him, for if

nothing else she always seemed comfortable under any circumstances. Except now she'd told him she was suspended from her job, pending an enquiry. And she was lonely.

He apologised. "None of my business, sorry."
"I can be your business if you want. To say something like that - none of my business - might imply you don't want it to be. Anyway, no need to apologise. It's my choice, Finn. Mostly, I like being alone. The times I do feel lonely it's,... interesting exploring those feelings."

"Loneliness is *interesting?"*

"Relationships are a pain in the arse, most of the time. We put up with the bad breath and bathroom noises in exchange for an ever decreasing exchange of body fluids. But having said that, you asked me if there was anyone in my life, and there is. Of course there is. There has been for years now."

This was news! Finn was relieved, then confused, then jealous. And then he thought that whoever it was could never be with Carina quite the same way he was with her right now, could never appreciate her, feel as grateful for her company, her conversation as he did, could never be quite as intimate in her company,...

Possessiveness, Finn?

But you're with Hermione now, remember?

How many women do you want exclusive access to?

"Em,... do I know him?"

"You're beginning to, I think."

"Oh?"

"Don't be so dense. It's you, you pillock."

Finn flinched as the shock ran from his heart to his stomach. It was both what he wanted, and what he most did not want to hear. And he didn't want to hear it because even though he wanted it, it complicated things beyond comprehension. And complication trumped wanting. Every time.

"Em, are we talking Eros here, or that other thing?"

"Agape? No, not agape, not quite." And then: "See?" she said, as if she'd just proved a thesis. "You hide from love. You fear love for the demands it makes on you. You fear love because you're already bedding someone else and believe it imposes some exclusivity on you, prevents you from loving anyone else, even though you can't help it. So you feel guilty. Guilt equals suppression, equals neuroses, equals payday for people like me. And I know you love me, Finn. It's obvious."

"It is?"

"Of course. I don't even need to ask you. And if I did you'd only lie and say no, or you'd say something evasive like: 'Of course I do but not in *that* way'. Sure, if I'd not sent you packing to Carrickbar, we could be together now. We both know this, I think, I hope. I could put up with you, Finn. You've only to ask and we could work something out."

"Carina,... don't tell me this now."

"There's nothing new in what I'm saying. Okay, we commit to one person in terms of physical loving, but in terms of love itself, there's no exclusivity. When I saw the look on your face this afternoon, when you realised I wasn't in that car, saw the depth of what I meant to you and how much it would have pained you to lose me, have you any idea what that did to my heart? What am I supposed to do with that, you dimwit? Throw it away? No, sorry, but I'm going to keep it, treasure it."

Carina had deftly turned the tables and was enjoying Finn's discomfort. He attempted an explanation of himself. "I owe you everything. Of course it would pain me to lose you. To think I'd never see you or hear your voice again, or sit there and have you lecturing me, tying me in knots,..."

"Really? Before you met me you had a wife, a family, a nice house, a job raking in sixty grand a year, and now you have nothing. That's not a lot to thank me for. I think I might have ruined you, actually. I do feel guilty about that sometimes."

"On the contrary, I have more than I've ever had before."

"Ah,.. I'm forgetting. And how is Hermione?"

"I don't just mean Hermione. I was heading for a car-crash. You saw it.

I saw it too, but only you had the guts to lean into my life and yank on the steering wheel."

"So we avoided the brick wall and ended up in the canal instead?"

"Better swimming than dead."

"True, but now it's you avoiding the question."

"Hermione's fine."

"Just fine?"

"She's,... wonderful to be with."

But Finn, Finn,... is Carina being serious?

Might you be together now?

And what did she mean: put up with him?

"What about your sexual life? I ask purely as your doctor, of course."

"You're not my doctor. And my sexual life is,... em,... none of your business, but otherwise,... it's fine."

"Yes, you have more colour than last time I saw you. But be careful. You *are* being careful, aren't you Finn?"

"Careful?"

"Contraception. It's a wonderful tonic. Sex. If only we could get it on prescription. But you're nearly fifty. A kiddie born now will still be at primary school when you're sixty. University when you're seventy. And poopie kiddies are the natural output of the sexual function, unless you're dysfunctional in that department, like me. Think about it."

"You sound like my mother now. Anyway, there's no danger of that. No future kid of mine will be able to afford university."

"We never did get onto the subject of your mother. It's where we usually start with analysis. The mother."

"Well, I got on fine with my mother, thank you very much. And you've

never needed to actually, *you know*, analyse me."

"True. I'd like to meet her."

"My mother's dead."

"I was meaning Hermione. And I'd like to see Helena again. Helena was,... a force of nature. Very interesting woman, that. An interesting Anima harem you're acquiring, Finn."

"I'm not even going to try to understand what you mean by that. But why not come and visit? Stay a while. You might as well since you're suspended."

She brightened, but Finn could see there was something forced about it. Even this was a test. "I will," she said. "I'll come. Shall I stay at your place?"

"Sure. I have a spare room."

"I'm teasing you Finn. I'm not coming."

"Why not?"

"Because it'll complicate things between you and Hermione. Yes, we love each other, but ours has always been a furtive relationship. Always will be. I wish it were otherwise, because I do love you, but it is what it is, and it looks set to continue that way. At least I know it's not entirely unrequited, just unconsummated."

Finn took a moment to think about this, and to read her expression. "You're winding me up. There's another kind of love. And it's nothing to do with Eros. And it's not agape, or whatever you called it. I don't know what it's called, but that's how we love each other, you and I - in that way.

"Philos," she said. "It's called Philos." But what she didn't say was Eros and Philos were interchangeable concepts, that one could easily morph into the other, depending on the prevailing taboos. "Oh, I don't know, Finn,.. how we like to label things. Eros, Agape, Philos,... it all sounds so terribly clever, so interestingly analytical doesn't it? But the important thing is that I do love you."

"I know."

"And I mean for ever, Finn."
"Me too."

He wasn't sure how they loved each other, exactly, only that they did. And he was glad.

Finn wanted Carina to come, to see Carrickbar, to see his home, to walk the beach, to take coffee in the Sea View Cafe, to meet Hermione, Helena, Anica, Kyle, Lionel. Sure, but Carina was right,... how did that work? Hermione was wonderful to be with and he ached for her when they were apart, but it still pained him to think of Carina living alone, and loving him, and lonely. And him loving her. Yes, he had said it: he had said 'I love you', to Carina, when he had never been able to say it to Hermione, but that was all right because, like Carina had said he say, it was a different kind of love and admitting it implied no commitment.

"You're thinking again, Finn. I smell burning. Share your thoughts."

"I'm thinking love is very confusing."

"Isn't it? Indeed all human relationships are confusing to Ego. Because they can't be measured."

"Confusing to an accountant too, because they can't be valued in the usual way. Now, would you like dessert?"

"Nah, dessert is twenty quid a head in this place, and I've lost my patience for it. Let's get out of here."

"Okay."

"Coffee at my place?"

"Em,.... sure."

She noted the hesitation, read his mind, smiled inwardly.

Finn would be easy all right, but there was no satisfaction to be had from that. She preferred him difficult, self aware, not so submissive. She wondered if that's how it had been with Hermione. She hoped not. She wanted to like Hermione, even though her dark-side wanted to hate her for taking a man she'd apparently been hoping to keep for

herself, even though she had no use for him.

She drove fast, but not on the straights. On the straights she slowed to the speed limit, and on the corners she tucked the car into the bends with a flourish, floored the accelerator, and it came out growling. Finn knew the little Porsche was sure footed, tyres at two hundred quid a piece, so he didn't fear for his life, even though the road was slick with rain.

Yet he wondered.

There was always something thrilling about Carina. What she could see coming bored her, stilled her into a dreamy somnambulance, but she met the unknown head on with an unflinching courage that impressed him.

"What will you do?" he asked.

"You mean the job? Well, so long as I'm not struck off I don't mind. They strike me off, that's another story, one that involves the courts, and I don't think they'll want to go there - I keep extensive records and no one will want me blowing the whistle, but I will. Which means I have a good negotiating position, which in turn means..., there are options."

"Options?"

"I can resign my position with honour. I've had the offer of a teaching post at Trinity, the opportunity of getting back into research. And I could work that in with some private practice."

"Trinity?"

"College. Dublin."

"Ireland?"

"Indeed. Maybe if I go there, you'll make it over yourself one day. That story about your father, and returning to Ireland, to the old country. I could see it meant a lot to you. Perhaps it's a thing worth exploring, Finn."

Finn was surprised she remembered that story he'd told her about his father, on the promenade at Carrickbar. But that was her job, remembering things others had selectively forgotten, picking through

what they'd unconsciously discarded for clues to whatever ailed them.

"But there's no recovery in Ireland," he said. "Except for the rich of course. For the rest, it's as wasted as everywhere else in Europe. Worse. Maybe I'd go for a holiday, and if you're there, then yes, I'll be thrilled to visit. But if I went there to live I wouldn't be answering any call that was half way rational, Carina."

"You could, though. Your father was Irish. You could reintegrate yourself into the whole, metaphorically, get the passport, become a European man again, instead of this splinter of petty egotistical nationalism. So could I. My grandfather was from County Clare. We have Celtic hearts, both of us, Finn."

"Yes, and unfortunately also Anglo Saxon brains."

"Don't be so dense. You could be my house-husband. I'm useless at housework. You don't need much do you? I mean sexually? You could fix watches, read, become a gentleman of leisure. We could get a dog as a substitute for a child, since were both past children now, and I could never have them anyway. Oh, do say you'll think about it, Finn. Do!"

She'd not talked about that, before today, thought Finn - the lack of children thing. But suddenly she'd mentioned it, twice. What was she trying to tell him?

She was grinning as she took the next bend. Finn resisted the temptation to grip his seat, tried to relax into the rush and the sideways pull. It was exhilarating, this sense of trusting in her, of giving himself over to her power, even if it got them both killed. "What worries me, Carina, is the feeling you're only half joking. And the more you talk, the more you remind me of Helena, stirring things up."

"Ah,... Helena! A goddess in disguise for sure. Not Greek, but maybe one of the Slavic pantheon,... "

"Never mind that, I thought you preferred being on your own, that it was the choice you'd made. Bad breath and bathroom noises, you said."

"But living with you would be the same as being alone, Finn."

"Kathleen would probably agree with that."

She met his gaze, and Finn understood. "You're getting it," she said, and then: "Don't worry about me. I'm not going to make things any more complicated for you than they are already."

"You keep saying that, and they keep getting more complicated."

"Okay, but listen: Don't tip-toe around so much. Don't be worried about making a splash. Of shaking things up! And if you want to hang on to Hermione, don't ever give her the impression she's alone in the house, when you're sitting in the same room."

Worry? Sure, Finn worried too much. And what worried him right now was the peculiar feeling he could see further into his future with Carina, than he could with Hermione, and if only because, of everyone he knew, he imagined she'd be the more forgiving of his foibles for having known him longer, and being able to label them. Sure, they'd still be having these conversations when they were old.

"Carina,... I,... you know,... you were right,... sometimes I wonder,.. you and me,...."

She glanced at him briefly, time enough to read that thing in his eyes and not for the first time - a flicker of sexual curiosity but mostly a longing for the mystery of a path not taken. Oh dear,.. here it comes then.

"It's not too late Finn," she said. "I mean if you want to. No strings. You want to,... just do it."

"How do you mean?"

She smiled. Hard for him to admit it. "Depends if you think you can handle it."

Can she really have understood him so deeply? He tried to cover himself. Since when had he begun to speak so unguardedly? "Em,... I didn't exactly mean,..."

"Yes, you did. And it's okay. Maybe we should explode the mix. Did you really never make love to Helena?"

Not that again! What mix? Do what?

"No. Absolutely not."

"Pity."

"You told me to be careful, as I recall."

"Careful yes. But not *that* careful."

"We should be careful too, Carina."

"Sure. But maybe not that careful either. Obviously, you need to think about it and decide."

"Decide?"

"If you can handle that sort of thing or not."

"With Helena, you mean? I told you,..."

"Not with Helena, you dick. With me."

Chapter Sixty Seven

Hermione is dozing on Helena's bed, both of them having drifted off to the sound of the sea. The light in Helena's room is the same light from the west that enters Hermione's flat above the cafe, but is more restful somehow, and her room has a peaceful scent. She tells herself it is the scent of Helena at rest - the wholesomeness of clean linen blended with the sophistication and the heavy lidded languor of an evening perfume.

Still too many nick-nacks though.

Uggh.

Helena lies under the covers, ivory satin pyjamas, fragrant from her shower, her head pillowed against Hermione's breast, a stain of drool on her shirt which Hermione tells herself she does not mind, while reassuring herself this is the only bodily fluid they'll be sharing. Helena is still sleeping, her lids flickering as she dreams. Hermione lays back, comfortable against deep pillows, one arm behind her head, the other around Helena's shoulders. Helena feels slender, light,... the body of a girl, the spirit of an Amazon.

The waistband of Hermione's trousers is unfastened from when she peeled them open to show Helena her appendix scar. She had conceded that Helena's disfigurement was much worse. Hermione is more comfortable with her trousers unfastened now, so leaves them be and in any case has no choice because Helena's hand has settled there, on Hermione's tummy, fingers under the zip, brushing the lace of her pants as if, like swallows, they are ready to slip south, into warmer climes.

When Helena's hand had first settled there, the familiarity had worried Hermione, though she'd tried not to show it in her breathing, and Helena had at least for once seemed unconscious of it. Anyway, she'd fallen asleep before things could develop further - if indeed that had been her intent. And had it so been, Hermione would have pressed her away, but gently, told her to stop pawing at her, that it wasn't funny any more.

Or maybe she wouldn't.

And why?

Because Helena's hand feels nice there, feels warm, soft - not like a man's hand - smoother, more silky - yes, above all not scratchy. Even Finn's hand, soft office type that he is, is a little scratchy.

She's also aware of the gap between Helena's fingertips and the button of her sex, and for a time she's been thinking to close it while Helena sleeps, first by her breathing and the undulating motion of her abdomen, imagining Helena's fingertips progressing millimetre by millimetre with each breath. And when those fingers did not move, she had wondered instead about helping Helena's hand with her own. I mean, just let it nestle in there, cup her sex, like Finn's sometimes does of a night. See how it felt.

And no harm.

Or was she dreaming all of this?

At any rate she was more fully awake now, and resistant to the idea, or so she told herself. But what would it be like to drift all night this way, to wake in the morning next to Helena, like,... what? Sisters? Friends? How close a friend would that make them? and at what point was this the sign of a shift in her position with respect to men, to Finn, and of course to her own sexuality?

Helena is after all, definitely not Lesbian, Hermione. And neither are you.

The gifting of an orgasm.

Is flexible concept, no?

Can girls really swing both ways, like it says on the Internet? I mean, more easily than men? Because, speaking of men, Hermione, you have succeeded in landing a decent man, yet it seems you are already looking for ways of ruining things. And why? Is it because you fear it might actually go somewhere this time?

Always the fear of trusting, Hermione. The fear of Brian.

Oh, shut up, who asked you!

But this? This is not a way out in the usual sense, for it is just as prone to breakage, to hurt. I mean, just imagine what Helena is capable of doing to a man who crosses her in love. Would she be any less

ruthless with a woman?

Before her thoughts can meander down this particular avenue, she hears the sound of the front door, Kyle dumping his bag in the hall and then his boomy greeting: "Home, Mum!"

She's been drifting here longer than she thought! She checks the time with the watch Finn gave her. Is it fast? She checks her watch against Helena's Rolex, glittering richly on Helena's bony wrist. No, it's proving to be steady, this old watch.

Like Finn, then.

Reliable.

Steady,...

Yes, yes,... all right.

It's just after four.

She shakes her head clear, zips up, eases herself free of Helena's embrace. Helena mumbles a sleepy complaint, lays her cheek against the warmth of the pillow, sleeps on. Hermione watches her for a moment, unhurried, ventures a stroke of her hair, lifts a strand clear of her eyes, curls it behind Helena's ear.

"Hermione?"

She's coming downstairs, tiptoeing in bare feet, Kyle standing in the hallway, looking up at her, puzzled.

"Hiya Kyle. Mum's just having,... em,... a nod."

Kyle is glad to see Hermione. Next to his mother she's the most comforting person to be around, but this is, never-the-less, a little odd. "Mum's okay?"

"She's fine, darlin'. Think I knocked her out with too much sea air this afternoon. We'll leave her be, eh? Can I get you something to eat?"

Kyle nods. He's hungry after his shift, and his mother always feeds him to take away the sting of the McKenzie bitch's vindictive tongue. Hermione is not blood, but has always been his aunt. She catches

something in his eye, in his reluctance to hold her gaze, like he's hiding a hurt, but she knows him well enough by now. Could it be he's suspicious of her and his mother?

Guilty conscience, Hermione?

But we're just,.. em,.. good friends, Kyle.

"You okay, 'darlin?"

No. He's upset after the McKenzie bitch docked him fifty quid, because his till was down, end of last shift, so he's basically worked the last couple of days for nothing.

"She keeps telling me the cash is down, but I checked it. I'm not that dumb. I can count money. Just,... I'm a little slow that's all."

"She ever docked you before?"

He nods, glum. Hermione has heard this of Mrs Mckenzie. There is no shortage of teenagers in Carrickbar wanting to work, even though small change is to be their only reward, no shortage therefore of victims to be exploited,... or cheated. What has happened to the world that everyone wanting to work must now work for these ruthless bastards?

"All right, 'darlin. You want to, you tell Mrs Crab-face she can shove it. How many hours a week she givin' you anyway?"

"'bout sixteen. Sometimes only four, sometimes nothing. It's a zero - hours contract or something, she says."

"Okay, so,... you come work for me five days, round lunchtimes. Three hours a day, makes up fifteen, okay? Regular. Startin' tomorrow. Eleven 'til two? It's busy round then, and we could use the help. We'll see how it goes, eh?"

Kyle's eyes open wide at the prospect. "Really? Work for you and Anica?"

Oh, shit, Anica!

Helena's going to have a fit..

She ever does get her hands in my pants it'll be to rip my pubes out, one clump at a time..
"Em,... sure." *I'll think of something.* "What's the name of that girl does the shift with you sometimes?"

"Holly?"

"She all right with you?"

Kyle nods, not sure where this is going and he definitely doesn't want to get Holly into trouble. "She's really nice with me. Helps me clean up when I,... break things."

Holly. Bless her.

"Good. Just try not to break anything at the café, or spill things on customers, okay?"

"I,.. I'll be really careful, Hermione."

"I know you will, 'darlin."

Holly. Nice girl, fond of Kyle, voice like a fog horn and, if we're being really unkind, not much to look at either. Helena calls her the fat-slapper-tart-with-bare-midriff. It might work. Sometimes it's difficult accommodating everyone.

"Beans on toast all right?"

Kyle likes beans on toast. Indeed of a sudden Kyle likes everything, in contrast to only that morning setting out to McKenzies when he'd not liked anything much at all. But now he likes the whole world. He hugs Hermione, leaves a wet kiss on her cheek, then stands embarrassed, smiling ear to ear.

"Thanks, Hermione."

"Yea well. Warnin' you, I may not be so nice when I'm your boss."

"You'll be a lot nicer than Mrs McKenzie though."

"Hope so, 'darlin."

He’s moving up. He’s moving on. He’s going to work at the Sea View

Cafe! Meanwhile Hermione is sliding deeper into something she does not understand, and the last person she feels she can discuss any of it with is Finn.

Chapter Sixty Eight

The light was changing, the year more for turning its back on the cold and the darkness. Carrickbar appeared, to Finn's eyes, to be awakening from a long hibernation. But it was more than the light, more than the daffodils sprouting from their pots along the promenade, more even than the different scent from the sea, which was sweeter somehow. It was also something in himself, a tide slackening. But whether it was about to ebb or flow, he could not say, only that a change was coming, and it unsettled him because he did not feel he was ready to accept it - whatever it was.

Story of your life, Finn.

When he'd first come to Carrickbar, all had seemed locked in ice, immovable, insoluble, dead. Now he had a way ahead, and things were moving. He had a feeling he could do something with his life again, that he could move on, make way. And yet,...

What is it, Finn?

Carina had thrown him.

He'd always had a rigid view of life and marriage, possibly even simplistic, but like other things these days, the old certainties were falling away. He could view it as a disaster or as something else, something liberating, life giving. He loved Carina, loved Hermione, loved Helena. He wanted them all in his life, but what kind of love was that?

His walk took him north, along the tide line, past the dunes, out to where a vast estuarine marsh cut in, even bigger than the one to the south, and here the way became treacherous. Hermione had told him the marsh could be crossed, that the river flowing through it grew shallow enough to wade at low tide, but that the churchyard was the resting place of many who had tried in ignorance, poorly timed it, and drowned. Sometimes his life felt like that, luring him in with its apparent simplicity, before revealing a profusion of ways, and each one leading nowhere, and the tide rising.

What tide Finn?

There is no tide.

Time then,...

Time running out!

He looked across the marsh, across its reedy fringes - a vast, natural barrier, navigated blithely only by birds and fools. Common sense dictated, for everyone else, a wide detour. It underlined how much Carrickbar was an anachronism to modernity, that it owed its existence to a quirk of economic expedience two centuries old, to the herring trade and to coals dug from English mines, both gone now. Like the need for Finn. There was no longer a reason for it to exist at all. Nor him. Yet here they both were. Still.

But why did anything exist? Why did any *one* exist for that matter. And now with modernity in ruins, and the rhetoric of politicians turning back to racism like in some grainy thirties movie, was Carrickbar, remote, aloof, a little wild and dangerous, not as good - or bad - a place to be as any other?

Old questions, Finn.
Circling.

Wheeling like the gulls, squawking over your head.

Dropping shite.

It was a clear morning, a sharpness to it, and out on the horizon, across a slit of sparkling, silty sea, and plain as day, there was an island where there had not been one the day before.

Well, do you see it Finn?

Yes, I see it, Dad.

He had seen it from the promenade, and it was this vision that had drawn him so far north along the beach, as if he intended walking out to it. But it was not Ireland; he knew that; it was the Isle of Man, and it looked so close Finn felt that if he could not walk exactly, then at least he might easily have rowed out to it, that only the marsh prevented him.

But nothing was what it seemed; it was the ghost of an island, the ghost of an idea, sometimes there, sometimes not - a bit like his certainty in the future. He could see the great cone of Snae Fell, its

flanks of crinkled baize spreading down to a sparkling sea, but he was thinking of Ireland as he looked at it - fantasies invoked by fantasies. Nothing real. Meanwhile the sea shimmered on the point of possibility, the island flickering like a faulty hologram, as if it would disappear if he did not reach out and grasp it.

Carina!

Carina was going to Ireland.

This was not an insignificant fact.

She was the tide going out on him.

She was going to live in a cottage by the sea. She was going to teach, she was going to write, she was going to mend souls and probe the things that ailed them.

All of this had him wondering if Carrickbar was far enough away to begin his life anew, or if Ireland would not be better, that his first dreaming of Carrickbar and being raised upon his father's shoulders was an omen, that Ireland was indeed the place for him to be. Carrickbar was only where he thought he'd seen it from: his salvation. And dreams were never what they seemed, never said what they appeared to be saying. Only later did one realise this.

Realise it too late, Finn.

Fantasy upon fantasy.

But Ireland was ruined, flattened in the first pass of the wrecking ball. There was to be no recovery for the poor, for the middle class, only more of the same, the same hollowing out, a vacuum to be filled by an entrepreneurial cadre that courted shamelessly corruption and the twilight zone of semi-criminality. And England was catching up, dragging the rest of the Union with it, breaking it in the process, a ruin of nationalistic shards like pointed sticks to poke one another with in the name of nostalgia.

Yet he'd slept on it, on this idea of Ireland, and though he had never been there, never seen if the streets be paved with gold or not, the idea appealed to him, and because it appealed, it also appalled him.

Are you going to be running for ever Finn?

An image of Carina came to him, tousled hair falling wild across bare shoulders.

Think you can handle it?

He shook it clear, walked on.

What had he done? How had it come to this?

In Carrickbar there were people who knew him, people who wanted him, who counted him among them and, though such a community of souls is what most lonely people crave, Finn was not like most lonely people; he had grown uncomfortable with company, with the idea of their needs, and had indeed uncovered within himself a dread of others needing him.

And yet,...

Unlike Carina, he was afraid of loneliness, saw no purpose in it, but he was afraid too of community, because sooner or later others would find him out, that he was just as human and frail, and as needy as them, that he needed love, craved it childishly, feared its lack, that there was indeed nothing special about him at all.

Foolish Finn. Foolish!

Since his father died, Finn had been a lost boy. And more, it was as if he had been lost so long, he no longer wanted to be found. He had adapted to the underlying circumstances of his life, and could be accepting of them, now, if only others would leave him alone. In Ireland, he could be a stranger again, and next time not make the mistake of allowing anyone to discover and value him, lest he should let them down. It was resentment then, the root of his neurosis, a rejection of the world that had rejected him, by killing his father.

True or not?

He kicked up a clod of wind-dried seaweed.

Fuck knows.

It was forty years ago, Finn.

You should be getting over this by now.

He met a woman on the beach, walking back from the marshy fringe. She was heading in the direction of Carrickbar, a proud, handsome woman, he thought - blue jeans, puffer jacket, and she moved with a confident stride. From a distance she bore a resemblance to Hermione - same hair, same pale skin. But he did not know her, and strangers were few hereabouts. But the remarkable thing was she was holding Squinty's mangy old mutt on a piece of rope, and the beast was trotting along ever so obediently beside her.

She greeted him pleasantly with a smile and a nod, but did not speak. Finn returned in kind, to which the mutt broke its docile stride in order to growl a bad tempered warning, as if at Finn's over-familiarity with its mistress. The woman served its rump at once a sharp whack with the loose end of the rope, then spat a terse reprimand in a language Finn did not recognise.

The beast, duly chastised, returned to a mute docility.

Squinty's girlfriend? No. The woman's language did not compute. Was it Polish? Russian? Romanian? Squinty was an unreformable racist, even against English Southerners, like Finn. How then might such a woman have gained permission to walk his dog?

Unless she was his slave.

But she did not have the demeanour of a slave.

A shadow passed over him.

Squinty Mulligan.

And Hermione.

Bastard.

"Sorry for that," she said.

"Hmm?"

Finn shrugged, erased the moment with a smile, saw she had a bruise over her eye and the now scabbing remains of scar from a recent cut on her lip. That figured, he thought - any woman who came near

Squinty could not help but get a little bruising. He let her walk on ahead of him, stood a while longer, pondering the enigma of the vanishing isle, and when she was no more than a dot against the white-washed tumble of Carrickbar, he headed back, for coffee.

It was late morning now, and the Sea View would be getting busy. He was glad Hermione had found some hours for Kyle. She'd also begun to pay Anica, now takings were on the rise. There was of course still the question of Anica's legal status, but Hermione had decided to assume we were all still citizens of Europe, until handed down a note by officialdom that told us we definitely were not.

Finn had a fondness for the early days of the Sea View, days when he would sit in the window and gaze out to sea, his hands warming around a coffee mug. But now the bustle did not suit him, and Hermione's "darlins", spoken with such cheery charm to her biker boys, made him wonder if she would not rather be roaring off on the back of their machines than spending her spare hours with him.

She amazed him still, thrilled him, but whatever did she see in him, this docile tinkerer with watches nobody wanted?

"I feel myself withdrawing, Helena. I don't know what's wrong with me."

He had chosen coffee at Helena's house instead of the Sea View, and Helena sat before him in leather trousers, a creamy mohair sweater, and glossed lips held half way as usual between a kiss and a scold. She regarded him with an open curiosity, pleased he had called without appointment, that he had felt he was free to call on her whenever he liked, and without expectation, because he was,...

Eminently.

Free, and without expectation.

Welcome,...

"You have made peace with Kathleen, now?" she asked.

"Yes."

"You dissolve your joined finances, and have secured future here, in Carrickbar?"

"Well, I don't know about secured, but it's certainly more secure than when I first came." He wasn't sure about the "here" bit either, but kept quiet about that because last time he'd brought it up she'd shouted at him.

"And your friend, Carina - the shrink lady. You are happy she is all right after sacking?"

"Well, she's suspended, not sacked. But yes, she'll be okay. It's only people like me who are damaged by life's ups and downs. Carina will probably find her own troubles interesting and write a book about them."

Helena checked his threatened descent into self pity with a narrowing of her brows, and he apologised. Nor did it escape her attention something in his tone had changed when speaking of Carina. He sounded defensive, guarded.

"You have warm, attentive lover in Hermione." she reminded him.

"Yes." No arguments there.

"Of course yes. I arrange this for you. So I know. So you have nothing to feel sorry about."

"Of course not."

"Or it is being with lover that unsettles you? After so long alone, I mean - marriage not withstanding - lovers are disrupting, but in a good way. It is good to be disrupted, Finn, yes?"

"Em,.. yes, I suppose." Yes, he supposes, but still does not like to be disrupted for long.

"Or you think you make wrong choices? Should have chosen me, perhaps? Or Carina? But Hermione is right for you. A year with me and you will really have something to be unhappy about. As for Carina?" She raises a brow, seeking to draw him out, but he's evasive again.

"Why's it wrong for me to beat myself up, Helena, yet you beat yourself up, all the time?"

"I do?" She notes he does not protest innocence regarding her or Carina - is flattered by the former, troubled now by the latter. Has

something happened between him and Carina? "All right. I apologise. No more beating up of self. Promise."

"And I wasn't aware you were on offer. You must have told me a hundred times you weren't."

"A hundred times? Surely not so many as that? But Finn, you watched over me in hospital, more devoted than any lover. This did not go unnoticed. And if you should ever need anything, anything at all, it will not go unrewarded. And with considerable enthusiasm. Again, I promise."

"Em,..."

She raised a hand to halt further speculation. "But I am forgetting, doctor said I should be careful of exercise involving back and hips for now." She laughed at his blush - always so easy. If Hermione should ever tire of him, she would try him, for sure.

If only the once.

Had he and Carina picked up where they'd left off that night, the night she'd called on him? They'd seemed cosy, easy together in a sophisticated kind of way – Carina modest enough, even self deprecating, but unable to disguise how effortlessly intellectually superior she was. And him,... him,... *basking in it.*

Released from his marriage he thought himself free and independent, but he was vulnerable to any woman who took an interest now. Helena would indeed destroy him. She knew this because she knew herself. Hermione would not hurt him, and he needed safety most of all. But Carina? She had shaped him, given him a kick up the arse, as Helena would have done, got him out of his stultifying marriage, and that was to be admired, but no matter what Carina said to Finn now, no matter what they might have done,...

Carina did not need him.

Finn chastised her gently. "You're a dreadful flirt, Helena."

"Not dreadful, please. I am very good at it. I flirt with everybody. I flirt even with your girlfriend. Beware Finn I do not change my mind and steal her from you."

Make him jealous? No Helena, he's a man. Mention girl on girl, and you risk simply inflaming his desires.

"Well, I'm sure you'd make a lovely couple," he said. "But what's the difference?"

"Oh? What is what difference, please?"

"You'd spare me a fate worse than death, being with you, but not Hermione?"

"Ah,... but, as I am telling her, it is different for girls."

"In what way?"

"Power of course. A man must hold the woman still before he can make love to her. No? Man takes, woman gives. A man takes nothing from me, ever again. But a woman? We are to each other giving. I might allow this."

Helena was just being Helena now, Helena of the clouds, the firmer ground of reality left behind as she soared, free associating, thinking aloud. She was not really talking of stealing Hermione from him. Was she? But even in the metaphorical sense, Finn wasn't so sure it was true, the thing about men taking from women. The woman did not hold still for a man unless she wanted him, and in his relationship with Hermione, although she gave much in return, she had done her fair share of taking too - Finn waking in the small hours with her fist around his sex, and a lack of ambiguity regarding what she wanted to do with it.

In sex, he decided, Helena was all talk, while Hermione's appetite was voracious and never far from the surface. Helena needed therefore to be careful, if she was indeed flirting with Hermione or she might get more than she bargained for. Finn wondered about that. He loved both these women, desired them both in fact, though one at a time of course. How would he feel though if he discovered their desire for each other was greater than their desire for him?

But this is not a day for examining hypotheticals, Finn.

"Anyway," he said. "how's Kyle enjoying the Sea View?"

Helena darkened. "He enjoys it very much, also proximity of Munchkin

Anica."

"Ah."

"Really I am unhappy about this and would not permit it, except Hermione tells me fat slapper tart with bare midriff, works at Mackenzies shop, also has feelings for him,... and Anica is at least presentable. This way she is shown to me as lesser of two disasters for Kyle. Hermione is transparent in this deception but she is close friend now, so I forgive."

Finn noted Helena's cruelty was still blistering, at least on the surface. But at a deeper level it betrayed only her vulnerability. "He's,... a good looking lad, Helena. Bound to attract,... young,... em,... ladies. Is this is Holly we're talking about? She always seems nice."

"Finn you are too much the gentleman. As for Anica, it is not so easily dismissed. And this is more than neurotic mother talking. Kyle is not so resilient as you or I. And girls can play cruel games with men. I know because I have played them all."

"Annie's a decent girl. I'm sure she wouldn't do anything,..."

"Anica might have to leave country, Finn, when racists draw up lists of foreigners to be either exported or shot. What then? I might have to leave also. And where will I go?"

"You may be right about Annie, I don't know. But you have a British Passport. You'll be fine."

"Passports can be cancelled. It is place of birth that matters now."

"But surely,... only under extraordinary circumstances."

"Finn, darling, for sure the world is not yet at war, but what is not extraordinary about the times we are living in?"

Finn had no answer to that. Both looked glum. Then Helena forced a smile, offered him cake. "Come eat up. Is lovely you call on me. Have you no other chit-chat? This topic depresses me."

He laughed. "Village gossip, you mean?"

"Sure, for starts."

"Okay. Saw a woman on the beach, walking Mulligan's dog."

"Oh?"

"Tall, good looking, early forties. Looked a bit like Hermione. Foreign accent. Haven't seen her around before."

"Ah, this is better Finn, this is promising. Walking Mulligan's dog, you say? We must find out who she is."

"Pity Kyle's not still working at the shop. He'd probably know."

"Hmm, yes,... next to public house, Mackenzies shop is gossip central."

"Maybe Hermione's heard something."

"No, Sea View Cafe is for incomers now. There is no local news there, only disasters from abroad. But tell me now, is my turn to change subject, your plans for camp site? You have made offer to Mulligan yet?"

Ah, the campsite. How had Helena got hold of that one? Hermione perhaps? He'd given it no further thought, wondered even what he'd been thinking in the first place, carried away on a rare, optimistic whim.

"You are still going through with it, aren't you?"

His hesitation spoke volumes and he feared the sharp edge of her tongue, but Helena was not so easily predictable. Instead, she gently enfolded his hands in hers. "You are afraid to settle with us, I know. We have much to do to convince you how beautiful a thing it will be. You, me,...and Hermione."

What?

"It's not that," he said, even though it was. "It's just a bit, awkward,... Mulligan owning the site and everything. He could be,... difficult. I mean,... I know what happened between him and Hermione."

Really? She'd told him that?

"Nothing happened between him and Hermione."

"I know nothing happened, other than he got a face full of body spray in response to him getting his dick out, and then he put the shop window in as revenge. He's not a guy to be trusted, Helena. He's off his head."

"Well, o*bviously* he is not to be trusted, Finn, but listen, Mulligan doesn't care who buys this land. Trust me."

"I do trust you, Helena. But I don't trust him. There's something not right about him."

"He is just dirty old man with big ideas of himself, and small penis,.. except I hear penis is very big indeed,... but wait,... *oh shit*,... I did not tell you that. Look,.... is fine, Finn. I buy land. We are partners in this."

Hermione had been silent on the sight of Squinty's penis, not that Finn had asked, and it did not help Finn now to be informed of it by Helena. But wait,... what was that? She was offering to buy the land? This panicked him because it meant he might actually have to make a decision.

"There's no need to do that," he said. "I'm not even sure it's a good idea, this campsite thing. I need to think about it some more, draw up a proper business plan. We might never break even. It could be a disaster."

"Is better than good idea Finn. Is important. You don't want to partner with me? Is that it? But for me is perfect. We can't be lovers just now, so partners is next best thing. I still get to shout at you and flirt daily. Otherwise Hermione will be suspicious."

Can't be lovers just now?

"Em,.."

"Is simple. I buy land, you buy little wooden huts to put on it. We fix shower block to acceptable modern standards, we open for summer season."

"But,... that's only a few months away - we'd have to advertise. No, the soonest we could open is next spring. And we'd have to work hard, spend the year getting things ready, and we'd start small - half a dozen pods, no more."

"But I have seen it Finn. Is big space. Twenty pods."

"That's too many. Too much investment up front. We must be more cautious. We start small. Half a dozen at the most. Test the water. Expand year on year. If we can. Twenty, yes,... I agree,... eventually. But not yet."

"Oooh, Finn, darling. Hermione is right - mention of business and you are assertive in very sexy way. All right, it is next year. We do exactly as you say. I also trust in you. Absolutely."

"But there's no need for you to buy the land, okay? I can raise the money now. I just need to think it through a little more, that's all."

"Yes, think it through. A little more. This is what I feared with you. Think it through for ever and do nothing. This is why I buy land."

"Really, there's no need. I've no idea what he's asking even. Knowing him it'll be way too much, and there'll be toxic waste buried on it or something equally foul and unexpected. We'd need a survey,..."

"Actually, price is reasonable. He is struggling to sell it for many years. My intelligence tells me this. As for survey, is just muddy field, Finn."

"Your *intelligence?"*

"Lionel."

"Lionel's in on this too?"

"He simply makes enquiries on my behalf. Lionel is great conversationalist and shameless gossip. Perfect."

"But still,.."

"You are not understanding Finn. It is my grasp of English perhaps. I am not meaning I will buy land in future."

"No,... that's good."

So what did she mean?

"I am meaning I have bought land *already*." She sat back, a triumphant

smile: "Contracts are exchanging."

"WHAT?"

"You are cross with me? You think I steal your idea. Make partnership with you by force?"

Finn took a breath, ashamed of his feelings. No, he was not cross with Helena, and he didn't care if she was of stealing his idea or not. In fact he was rather hoping she would, that she'd resurrect the old campsite herself, because then no one needed him, and he needn't stick around. There'd be nothing tying him here and he could float away, mend watches nobody wanted, live in a shed in the back garden of Carina's cottage,.. in Ireland.

What an extraordinarily dumb idea.

Well, do you see it, Finn?

"Finn? Darling?"

"Em,... that was a big investment, Helena."

"So, I can afford it. Well,... husband affords it for me."

"You talked to your husband?"

"Not talk. I refuse talk to bastard. Email only."

"You asked him for what? A hundred grand and he gave you the money just like that? It had to be a hundred at least."

"Not a hundred. Nowhere near. But sure. Finn, listen, my Husband he invests two hundred million this week alone in luxury hotels and other amenity for wealthy to live big. So, you see, is very small change for buy muddy field in Lancashire. He keeps me happy, then I don't make difficulties for him and tart bitch mistress."

"But Helena,..."

"Oh,.. still you think I cheat you? Okay, I sell land to you if you want, same price I paid. Is no difference to me. But I want share in business."

"But why? It's hardly likely to earn enough to keep us both."

"You forget, I need no keeping. I am already well kept, thank you. I want this for Kyle. He works with you - mows grass, keeps tidy,... he is very tidy person, Finn. He will do well with you. Is perfect, yes?"

Kyle,... of course!

"Ah,... you are thinking maybe what does Kyle need with job, when he has money from rich parents?"

"No,... no,... I understand, Helena. Without a job, life for a teenager is just pot noodle and computer games until the small hours of the morning, and lying in bed till three in the afternoon. Kyle knows that too. He needs something to do."

"Good. This is true. You satisfy me, Finn."

"So, you bought the land because you suspected I'd no real intentions of going through with it myself."

"You are hard man to tie down. I know men like you. Reluctant to engage. One day we wake up and you are gone. I fear this. I really do. But I also hope this too, because then I steal your girlfriend. For sure I do. So fuck off, I run campsite myself, and marry Hermione."

"You don't mean that."

"Which? Run campsite or marry Hermione?"

"Either. Both. But if I did go,... and I'm not saying I will, who's to say Hermione wouldn't come with me?"

"You are fool if you think this. She has made commitment here. Of course, I understand you are afraid of commitment too."

Finn flared at that. "I've nothing to prove when it comes to commitment, Helena. I made a commitment a long time ago: Wife, family, job,... thirty fucking years in the Health Service,..."

"Oh,.. language Finn. But exactly. It went wrong, and you are broken because of it. I understand this. So you fear new commitment. Really, is very simple. It surprises me your shrink lady has not explained this to you. But this time you cannot fail."

"I can't fail?"
"No. Because I am trusting you. This is my side of the bargain. You commit to new life and *I* trust. This is challenge for us both, I think. I will not let you down in my trust. Ever. It is rare I say such a thing where men are concerned. But I have more faith in you, perhaps because we are not lovers. Now, on same basis - not lovers I mean - can you commit to me?"

She was still holding his hands, toying gently with his fingers, kneading them, stroking them. Her hands were beautiful, he thought - delicate, long slender fingers, and very warm. She leaned across then, took his shoulders and hugged him. He met her half way, folding into the sweet softness of her sweater and with an ease that surprised them both. He thought she smelled of heaven. She thought he smelled sincere, but the cheap shaving cream she could also smell was clearly bad for his skin, and she would have to mention it to Hermione.

Bad for skin, Finn.

"Don't leave us," she said. "I know you are thinking of it. But we are all in love with you and lovers should stick together. So let us do this silly thing. You and I."

"Silly?"

"Silly for sure. Campsite on windy hill. Shall we call it Windy Hill Camping? Idea is ridiculous, but will work. I know it."

"Em,.. Windy Hill's not the best name for a campsite. Might as well call it boggy meadows."

"See?... we discuss plans already. We are natural partners." She drew back a little from their embrace but held on to his hands, gave them a squeeze to emphasise her sincerity. "Carrickbar is not prison. Is not trap. Is escape Finn. Escape at last from running away. Remember story you tell me of running from school and they send girl to run after you? Bring you back to prison?"

"Yes."

"Well, this time you make it all the way home. Or is it that you are running so long you are afraid to stop now?"

"As I recall, you also told me I should be wary of fast girls who come after me."

"For sure this is true. But as a rule you are safe, so long as you never let them kiss you."

She leaned over then, kissed him playfully on the lips, mussed his hair, winked at him.

"So,... I make coffee now?"

Chapter Sixty Nine

Handling Carina would have meant going with the flow. It would have meant going with the mood of the moment. It would also have meant meant the sexual and the romantic betrayal of Hermione, and the conscious keeping of a secret; it would have meant the dismissal of guilt, the abandoning of all moral sense. It would have meant following Carina into her house that night, drawn in by her smile and the gentle trail of her perfume, and in the full knowledge of what would happen - also, of course, in the wanting of it. And Carina was right in that respect, he *had* wanted it.

And so had she.

It would have been in the rising from her bed next morning and driving away with the feeling nothing was disturbed between them, nor between him and Hermione, even though he had spent the night getting to know a different side of Carina, and she of him, that his body was now infused with her scent, and hers with his.

Diffidence. And languor.

Languorous as a hot summer's day, *Finn!*

But no for all that he had wanted it, what a man wants and what he can allow himself to have are rarely the same thing. He was a simple soul and could not have handled it. He could never have been so,... *Bohemian.*

Carina, ever the quiet reader of people's souls, had known it too, known how with every word and every move he betrayed both his love, and his flickering wants, feeble with constant suppression. Above all else it was his love that rendered things between them either possible, or impossible.

It had been to show him he could not handle it she came to him while he sat pensive upon the sofa that night, came to him in her dressing gown, shrugged it off so she stood before him, most beautifully nude, indeed appearing to him in the soft light of her living room like a vision of loveliness slotting in to his most perfect romantic fantasy - long hair unkempt, tousled, wild about her shoulders, hands on hips,... something elfin about her, something other-worldly. And challenging.

As an object, she was indeed quite something, he thought. But the

thinking of it only served to underline that she had never been an object to him before, and he was not about to relegate her to that position now. Women never were objects to Finn, and maybe in this increasingly misogynistic and objectively sexualised age, that was his problem. To desire Carina meant separating the object from the soul, by cutting.

Make it or break it, Finn.

But once rendered thus, could he ever have stitched the halves of her back together again?

His appreciation of her was in his look, in his eyes, and gratifying enough for future reference, she thought, but his eyes were not eaten with black, more twinkling, possibly even a little tearful with that love for her, for the love of God, or more accurately the goddess he saw in her.

It was a common occurrence in the psychotherapeutic setting - the patient falling for the analyst - the transference. It would hardly be the first time. But there was also the counter-transference to contend with - the analyst falling for the patient - rarer, but not beyond the bounds of possibility, not that Finn had ever been a patient of course, but the same rules applied, given the intensity of their connection. All it meant in this case was the counter-transference was not unethical,... unless she acted upon it. And since he was not her patient, it did not matter.

Still, she had no desire to break him, to test him beyond endurance. She had not released him into the world so she might claim him, had she? What use had she for a man, anyway? She still had work to do, and it would be a rare self-contained man who could put up with her capricious and precarious companionship.

A man like Finn, Carina?

She invited a hug, rather than his tongue, and he had hugged her back, held her to his breast, warm, and for a long time, as if to soak up the memory of her. And then she'd said: "Kiss me quick, and go home, you bum."

So he had kissed her, a quick squeeze of the lips, his hands charged with the heat of her skin, of the deep hollow of her hips, and pressing lightly, but of a sudden animated and longing for a more intimate knowledge. But it was impossible, this thing. And what was that? That

he'd not wanted to be parted from her? Not wanted to lose her to the noise of the world?

If he had but once swept his hands up from her thighs to the smoothness of her back, that would have been enough to change everything, to light up something different in both of them. But he did not do it. Could not do it.

He'd known what he was feeling was that only by making love *right then, that moment* could he be assured of never losing her again, as if in the act of it, that simple thing, it would fasten her to him,... f*or ever!* But he could not lose her, she was saying, even though he might never actually see her again.

He thought of her now as he raked pink pea gravel. He and Kyle were gradually spreading six tons of it over the mulch-matting he'd laid upon the old flag floor of the tea garden at the Sea View Café. Kyle was tirelessly filling barrow loads from ton weight bags deposited on the pavement by the builder's merchant, and he was tipping them with gusto, Finn smoothing out the piles, spreading the gravel with a more even perfection than was strictly necessary.

They'd just about have enough, he thought.

It looked good against the freshly distempered walls, and the pale blue of the sea. New tables and chairs were coming tomorrow. Sure, the world looked like it was totally screwed: Europe was disintegrating before their very eyes, and America had gone mad, but they were carrying on as if the sun would shine tomorrow. What other choice had they?

He'd freed the gate with WD40, got it swinging and latching smoothly. A fresh sign on the wall - Anica's idea, and painted by Kyle upon a piece of smooth driftwood he had found - sought to entice trade from the beach in summer: Sea View Cafe. Open.

Keeping busy, Finn?

Sure, busy.

Busy was better than brooding. Busy was better than the destructive vortex of self-contemplation, because what he contemplated was impossible. And infuriating. But then again, no, he could not even say it was impossible, because that would require a firmer grasp of the facts

than he had, or was more likely capable of.

There are no spreadsheets to solve the most pressing, fundamental paradoxes of life, are there Finn?

Tomorrow he was fixing a broken light switch at Helena's house. She had complained of being unable to hire an electrician, them being overpaid prima-donnas, she'd said. And when one could be coaxed across the threshold, possibly with the promise of sex, they'd suck their disgusting English teeth at the lack of adequate wiring regulation, then quote a year's salary for the rewiring of the entire house before they'd even touch the light switch. And all she wanted was a new switch to prevent her and Kyle from being electrocuted. But this was too small a job. This was beneath them. No, she did not care for electricians, nor indeed any other kind of tradesperson.

Want kick up arse, Finn.

So, you can fix for me?

Yes, he could fix.

Helena’s perfume? Something bright, sharp, bracing. Hermione’s was warmer, sweeter, comforting - Carina’s heavy, sleepy, secretive, and powerfully seductive.

Seductive?

Since when?

With or without him, Carina would be all right. But would he be all right without her? Caught between the twin elemental maelstroms of Helena and Hermione, would he last even a year? She would always be there, in the background - a furtive non-lover, whose hot nude hips he'd rested his palms upon, scalding in their heat, and her breasts, so deliciously soft against his chest.

He could barely handle this memory of holding her,..

Thank God they had done nothing else!

Hermione was serving hot chocolate to Helena. He had a view of them through the patio doors, Helena perched elegantly on a barstool, Hermione leaning across the counter, their heads together as they

talked, something intimate between them, he thought, Helena for once receptive, subtly submitting herself to another.

It was quite,... lovely.

It was not for the first time it had crossed his mind there might be something more to Helena's teasing about her and Hermione, that they might actually be carrying on in *that* way or at least thinking about it. And he felt,... well,... warm at the thought of it, of Hermione rescuing Helena as she had rescued him, with love and tenderness and a nurturing spirit.

Not with girl on girl porn. This was a loving intimacy. Vital for life.

How strange of you to see it that way, Finn!

Meanwhile Hermione was learning of his partnership with Helena. She was thinking perhaps that was why he'd been distracted these past days, since returning from the South, wondering also why he'd yet to tell her this news himself. But then Finn was not a great one for news. His news of Kathleen and of Carina had been bare-bones to say the least, void of emotion, as if censored - therefore suspicious - and she'd wondered about that too, but then this news of him and Helena,...

Sure, yes, that would explain it.

Questioning him was like pulling teeth - even if she dared do it, which she did not, mostly, because that was how it had been with Brian. And Brian had been prone to a certain explosiveness. It was not that she felt Finn was in any way the same- indeed she was sure he was not, but we are all conditioned by our past relationships, whether we like it or not.

She'd noticed a couple of little parcels on his desk, unopened. There was a watch too, spread in pieces, gathering dust for days, untouched. It was as if a part of him had been kicked sideways and he could no longer focus.

Had the business with Kathleen been so dramatic as that?

"Listen, he loses everything," explained Helena. "Then he comes to Carrickbar where strangers try to put him on his feet again and give him odd-jobs, and make love to him. But is deep wound, and complicated letting go of past, of trusting future. He has known

Kathleen for long time. Carina too maybe."

Carina again!

"Helena, what else do we know about Carina?"

Helena shrugged, buying time, not knowing how best to proceed: truth or deception? *Keep it neutral, Helena. And careful with it.* "Not much. Strange one. Stranger even than Finn."

"But,... do we need to worry about her?"

"Worry? In what sense worry? Worry for well being? Or worry she might take Finn from us? She plays a close game for sure, and I would not like to match her with wits, but trust me, Carina is not the problem here."

Deception?

"Then maybe it's you, Helena. Maybe *you're* the problem."

"Me? Pfft. How many times I tell you? I will not take Finn behind your back." A slice of a smile escaped her. "Only with permission. But since it is you I want to marry, it is more a case of Finn who keeps you from me."

Hermione looked around to see if Anica was listening. Anica was cleaning tables, pretending not to listen, but was clearly,... listening.

"Dint mean like that," said Hermione. "I was meanin' more like this partnership thing. You and him. Go easy, is all I'm sayin'. Not so shouty. You're a scary woman when you get goin'. You shout at me, I'll square right up and tell you to fuck off, and nothing personal, forgotten as soon as it's said, like you no doubt, but Finn's a bit like Kyle,... sensitive. He'll take things to heart."

"Listen, Finn and I understand one another. I do this for Kyle. It is good for him to be around Finn, instead of home alone with neurotic mother."

"You're not neurotic, just scared like the rest of us, only for different reasons."

Kyle burst in to announce all was finished and everyone should come

and look. Finn was smoothing out the last bit when he turned to see them, Helena, Hermione and Anica. They were cold, hugging themselves, but each of them beautiful, smiling. They needed him in their different ways, and he needed them, and was it not the lack of being needed and needing that had brought him here? Could it be his greatest need was in fact to be needed?

Don't go there Finn.

You're wearing yourself out.

The sound of bikes on the road sent Hermione back into the café. Helena followed. Anica waited until Helena was also safe inside before jumping up and planting an affectionate peck on Kyle's cheek. She gave him a backwards smile as she too returned to her work. Kyle looked startled, held his palm to his cheek as if to keep the kiss from evaporating. "Does that mean she doesn't think I'm strange, Finn?"

"What? Em,... all men are strange to women, Kyle. The best that can happen is they be accommodating of it, and us of their strangeness too. It's the only way we can get along. Men and women, I mean."

Kyle tried to follow this one through, failed. "Eh?"

"Sorry, mate. It definitely means she likes you."

Her furtiveness also means she's worried about your mother.

And I don't blame her.

But that Anica liked him was a revelation for Kyle, and Finn felt a swelling in his heart at the light in Kyle's eyes - that Kyle felt special, felt good that he had so connected with another. Finn knew he must have felt that way himself once, but it was so long ago he could not remember. Such a loss of innocence was the curse of manhood, the curse of knowledge, the curse of spreadsheets the size of Africa.

By some peculiar subliminal association, and leaping from his spreadsheet, Finn was reminded of the love-bug virus that went around by email some years back. An email appeared in one's inbox with the subject: "I love you", and an attachment that wiped out heaven knows how many millions of hard drives, because everybody clicked. All anybody wanted, rich or poor, was to be loved. And needed.

He'd received a copy of it too, deleted it at once, instinctively suspicious of it.

Story of your life Finn?

They spent a while longer clearing up all trace of gravel from the pavement, then Kyle and Helena went home, but not before Helena delivered Finn a parting hug and a kiss under Hermione's watchful eye. Finn did not see the wink Helena gave from over his shoulder, nor the exchange of knowing smiles.

He returned to the tea-garden, bewildered, fussed around with the rake some more, as if reluctant to go indoors. Hermione still had customers. The light was slipping west, the sun dropping to a finger's width of the horizon. The clouds had peeled back and the sea was beginning to glow with amber under the nearing kiss of the sun. It was to be a fine sunset. He leaned upon the rake and gazed out, anticipating the quiet mystery of the evening.

Hermione saw him still there as the last of her customers were leaving - amber highlights on his face and forearms. She wrapped a cardigan about her shoulders and brought him hot chocolate to warm him.

"It looks really nice, Finn. Can't wait to get tables on it."

Finn nodded, his thoughts still far away.

She followed his gaze. "Pretty isn't it, the sea? Don't think I can never live anywhere 'cept by the sea now."

"Warmer by the sea in Devon though?"

She gave a snort. "Yea, lots. Lots of bad stuff there too. You know that. Won't ever be goin' back."

"Well, why would you? You're making a real go of this place, Min. It'll be a gold-mine in the summer. I'm really pleased for you."

She smiled, warmed by his tenderness, by the way he called her Min, but she was still anxious about those faraway eyes. "Gold mine's not the aim here, darlin'. Just somethin' half decent will do." She shrugged, changed the subject. "So,.. Helena's bin fillin' me in on the latest with your campsite plan."

"Ah, that. I'm still not sure it's a good idea. But you know what she's like. Always taking the bull by the horns. Looks like we'll be reviving it together, whether it's a good idea or not. But like you said, a gold mine's not the aim – just something half decent."

"When were you going tell me about you and her?"

Oh? And, when were you going to tell Finn about you and her, Hermione?

Be quiet. That's different. That's just,... imaginary.

And nothing to tell anyway.

"Me and Helena? Still coming to terms with that to be honest. You okay with it?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Because since coming to Carrickbar everyone, including you has assumed she and I are,... what's the word?"

"At it?"

She leaned into him and lay her head upon his shoulder. "'S'all right. I know you're not."

He gathered her more closely. "Of course I'm not. Look, how about we go out?"

"Out?"

"Yes. Dinner. Posh frock. We deserve it."

"Tonight?"

"Why not?"

"Dunno,... do we have to?"

"Well, not if you don't want."

"It's just,... I don't do dinner in posh places, Finn. I've not the manners. I'll only get gravy all down my front or somethin' and everyone will

laugh. And I've no posh frocks. Only frocks that make me look like,.. like a,... a cheap tart."

"None of that is true,... night in then?"

"No,.. dint mean it. Sorry,... little girl talkin'. Dinner sounds nice. But somethin' light. Don't want us comin' back with heavy tummys, okay?"

"Okay. Can I ask why?"

"'Cos I'll be wantin' to shag your brains out, that's why you ninny." She watched him as she said it, watched his face light up. It was not that he no longer desired her then. She could still easily pierce the crust of whatever was bothering him with the sharp lance of her wantonness.

He enfolded her a little more snugly, squeezed, breathed her in. She was so precious, so brave, he thought.

And so damned sexy.

"We don't have to wait until tonight for that," he said.

She warmed to his suggestion. "Love you darlin'," she said, then felt his chest rise as he caught her words. She waited for him to say it back, but he didn't, either because he couldn't, or,.. well,... because he didn't. But she wasn't going to push him on that because she wasn't stupid.

Finn was a good man, and he was hers, and though she didn't need a man in her life, she was for keeping him just the same, even if all she had to offer was sex, and a way with food, and a warm bed in which to heal away the day's hurt.

As for Finn, what more could a man want?

Chapter Seventy

Squinty wanted Nina, but Nina was skilful in evading his less than subtle advances. It was more than the lock on her bedroom door, though; she'd found she was able to control him entirely without the appearance of doing so. She had deep cleaned his house, presented him with expenses for essential items, like new sheets for the beds, strong disinfectants and other gunks for the mould and the grease, and a new washing machine, then she might even boil the oil from his overalls. She had done all of this with a professional sparkle, because she was, after all, his housekeeper. But there was also a hint that if he complied, it would please her, and eventually she would please him in return.

It had also not escaped his notice that her English was much better than he'd been led to believe.

A skip was summoned, and much of the scrap metal that lay around the garage was got rid of, Squinty presented with a wad of cash from the scrap man that surprised him. It wasn't that he needed the money of course, so he told Nina to buy herself some new clothes with it, thinking it would sweeten her towards him. And it did, but not in the way he was hoping, and he found he didn't mind so much, found indeed some things in life were worth the waiting for.

Thus was Squinty's life - quietly - transformed.

The dog's too.

The dog had never had a name other than "dog". It had always been merely something to keep on the end of a chain and to warn away intruders, and it lacked affection, certainly. So Nina gave it a name, began teaching it Polish, and the creature was a fast learner.

Squinty was unconvinced of the need for a name, until Nina managed to communicate to him the vet needed a name for the dog in order to register it.

Vet?

Register?

Yes, vet, register, Mr Mulligan.

The dog was ill, she told him; prone to a foul flatulence, result of an un-dog-like diet of scraps. Squinty was then further presented with vets bills and weekly receipts for proper dog food. Again, Squinty found he did not mind. He had plenty of money to burn, and where Nina was concerned he did not mind burning it.

The dog, now Billy, benefited greatly from the attention, also its daily exercise on the beach. Its coat began to shine, and its nose was more healthily wet, it became more even-tempered. And it adored Nina.

Squinty too found himself with clean clothing and a hot meal every night, served with clean utensils at a table in his newly pristine kitchen with a pristine cloth on the table. He became a gentleman of leisure. And while she served him with a smile, he dreamed of course of handfuls of her peachy arse, and pointy tits, but could not yet risk their taking, for fear of her censure and the loss of this startling transformation, this exquisite comfort in his life - I mean, Hermione had gone nuts and all he'd asked her to do was touch his dick!

Couldn't take a risk like that again!

Women were strange creatures.

For now though he was witnessing his home being put back more to the way it had been in his boyhood: secure, warm, nourishing. Could it be, for all his claimed affinity with squalor, Squinty simply missed his mum?

He was a generous employer. Nina had once worked in a shipping office and earned far less. It was of course all cash, and like her, strictly under the radar: no tax or national insurance. So much for the European Economic Union. For all the pontificating of politicians of all persuasions, the only economy worth a damn these days was black. And why not, since the future was erased, all people could reliably live for was the present, except Nina put her money in a tin, hid it under a loose floorboard. You couldn't run without money, she reasoned, and after a few weeks, she had plenty to run with.

But did she really want to run?

Strange, she'd thought of nothing but escape since realising she'd fallen into a den of thieves, but things were different in Carrickbar. They were cleaner, less complicated, less threatening, and she wondered if by sleight of hand the situation might not be normalised,

legitimised somehow, except,...

The burst nose had been the result of an argument with her so-called employment agent over his taking of her passport and agrigultural workers certificate. She knew this wasn't proper, that she should get herself to the Polish embassy, but for now there was the memory of that burst nose and the intimidation of the men she was dealing with, and who terrified her. She'd feared Squinty too at first, when she'd learned of her fate, suspected him of being some kind of criminal kingpin who'd be demanding sexual favours, but she had since worked out he was no such thing. He was just a hapless fool with a gruff manner, but rather a nice smile when he could manage it. And, given his association with these odious characters he was probably in as much trouble as she was, only unlike her he hadn't realised it yet. He was a lecherous buffoon as well of course, but she was used to that and it was easier to deal with.

Sure, there were possibilities here.

Early on she'd noticed her employer was clearly lustful for the woman who ran the cafe. Nina had seen him tracking her as she jogged by of a morning. So Nina copied her hair, and as many of her mannerisms she could deduce from a distance. And slowly, Squinty focused less upon the arse of the woman from the cafe, and more upon Nina's. Thus by guile and womanly wit were Squinty and his dog to a degree reined in.

The precise nature of his troubles were a mystery to her, likewise the nature of his business with the agent. He was a mechanic of sorts, she presumed, but the antiquated mess of his premises made her wonder, also his apparent lack of business in that line. She found herself pumping petrol to a passing motorist one morning, and when asked how much per litre, she asked Squinty, and he didn't know - indeed he was surprised the pump still worked.

But then the strange car turned up, anonymously, overnight, a flat tyre, and Squinty deeply troubled of a sudden. He contemplated that flat tyre for an entire day. Nina even offered to change it for him, wondering if he had perhaps forgotten how. Then, as the sun was going down, he tossed a shovel and his gun into the back of the Landrover and drove off in a hurry. It was only then she deduced some of the depths of his troubles, and being a compassionate soul, worried for him.

But Squinty's troubles were deeper, and more manifold than she could fully appreciate. It transpired he'd sold the campsite - or at least very nearly. And if he hadn't been contractually bound he might have pulled out, because the last thing he wanted was another wad of money to avoid the tax on. He'd no idea who'd bought it either - someone called Aynslea. But Squinty rarely got as far as surnames, and had yet to make the link to Helena. On the upside he was shut of it at last, a campsite prone to blowing tents away and, on one memorable occasion, turning caravans over in July, necessitating medovac of multiple minor casualties to Weston's A+E - in those days when Weston still had an A+E.

Anyway, good luck to whoever had bought it he thought, all this with a chuckle. His most immediate problem though was that of retrieving the stuff he'd buried up there, and getting rid of it.

The campsite was in darkness by the time he arrived, its vague landscaping picked out only by his headlights. It had been a cheery place once - he remembered it fondly, had even camped up there himself as a child, and the vans had brought all sorts of strangers in from all over the country, some even from abroad - touring with their own vans. The summers had seemed warmer then, the beach cleaner. Nowadays you never knew quite what was going to wash up on it.

But as well as the inclement weather, running the site had been a pain, never bringing in much income. Plus, when his folks had passed on, his shoddy people skills hadn't been up to maintaining much of a polite rapport, and custom had fallen away. If Trip Advisor had been around in those days, it would have made for interesting reading.

He'd not been up there for a while, not since burying the stuff. It was safe, a few feet down, beneath the plain white stone he'd used as a marker, and easily picked out by the headlights. He'd taken the shovel and the gun, propped the gun against the bumper, just in case - in case of what, he couldn't say, only that he felt a little safer having it there in easy reach. A hundred thousand pounds wasn't a great deal of money these days, but easily more than a man's life was worth, at least so far as the people he was dealing with were concerned, so he'd better be looking sharp in getting rid of it and avoiding all potential slip-ups inbetween.

Then he'd be getting out of the import business altogether.

Somehow.

While somehow also holding on to Nina.

Thus motivated, he set to work.

___

It was Kyle who noticed the lights from the meadow. He was enthused by news his mother had bought the site, thinking it might lead to something further that was good and positive, on top of his job at the Sea View. When she'd told him of the plan, he'd begun looking forward more than anything to mowing the grass of a summer - the sweet smell of it, the chug of the mower, and the views of the sea. Suddenly Carrickbar was the best place in the world to be!

So he told Helena there was someone up there in a car. She could just make out the meadow from the front-bedroom window, saw the glow of lights, then phoned Finn to see if it was him. Finn, who was taking the back off an old Accurist at the time and had completely forgotten the whole campsite thing, was surprised, and was glad to confirm it wasn't him.

But if it wasn't him, who was it?

"Em,... you want me to have a look?" he asked, hoping she'd say no, then he could get back to the watch.

But yes, Helena wanted him to have a look, to drive on up, but to stop by the house on the way because they'd be waiting outside. So that was how Finn, Helena and Kyle came eventually to be standing in front of a gun, held up with a nervy reticence by a distinctly twitchy and obviously squeamish Squinty Mulligan.

"What the fuck you all doing ere?"

"Is my land," said Helena. "What the fuck you do here?"

There was something of an inappropriate confidence and an energy in Helena's voice, thought Finn. He could see this was a situation that needed handling with delicacy, but the sight of Squinty had transformed her. It was more than her usual bravura. She was suddenly spoiling for a fight, only the gun, of course, gave her pause.

"What do you mean *your* land?"

Kyle was trying to step in front of Helena. "Mum bought it."

"No need for the gun," said Finn.

"Contract's not gone through yet," said Squinty, "So it's still mine. Now you lot just clear off and let me get on. This is my business, understand? It's private."

"Contract exchanged at ten o'clock this morning," said Helena. "So,... is my land." She motioned with her head to the excavation behind him, the sack of something lying beside it. "That belongs to me. Whatever it is."

Squinty shook his head. "I wouldn't push it if I were you, love. Just turn around and leave. Ten minutes and I'm gone. Forget you saw me up here. Forget you saw *that*. Trust me, it's best."
"Or what? You shoot?"

Finn flashed his torch beam over the sack, read something in Squinty's expression, read the danger in it, and understood the gun. Ordinarily he suspected Squinty would not be a man to use a weapon, but there were always desperate circumstances that could drive anyone to it. This was one of them. He didn't know for sure what was in the sack, could hazard a guess, but what Squinty needed here was a plausible get out, and he needed it fast or, with an aggressive Helena sniping at him, he might just lose his temper, and nobody wanted that. Finn was an unlikely ally then, but he was the only one Squinty had.

"Okay. We're going."

But Helena was definitely not for going. "Finn?"

"We should let Mr Mulligan recover the remains of his dog in private."

"Remains? Dog?"

"The body of an old dog of yours, Mr Mulligan, eh? Obviously."

Squinty was also slow to catch on, but did so eventually, wondering if Finn perhaps expected a cut for keeping quiet. "Dog? Em,... oh, aye. Obviously. What else did you think? Grand old dog 'e were 'n all. Died last,... em,... spring. Didn't want to leave 'im up ere, what with the site changing hands and all that,... like. I'm sure you understand."

Yes, Helena understood very well,... *that he was lying.*

He set the gun aside, propped it back against the bumper, looked contrite. That was when she came at him, landed a swift and well aimed knee to the groin, then a punch in the face. The punch surprised him with its sting, but it was the knee that really hit the spot, collapsed the wind out of him, had him wheezing and crouching, cross-legged and turning for the gun. But it was only to support himself. He did not want to use the gun as a gun, more use it as a stick to stop himself from going down. Kyle didn't know that, and snatched it from him so Squinty crumpled to the mud.

Finn took alarm. "Kyle!..."

But Kyle had no intentions of firing the gun. He just wanted it out of harm's reach, to protect his mother, to protect Finn.

Squinty shook his head, took a moment to form his words. "It's not loaded you dozy buggers. I wasn't going to use it. Jeez, you crazy bitch,... what was that for?..."

Helena spat at him. "Had it coming, you low-life pervert. Go near Hermione again and I tear your fucking balls off, one at a time and feed them to the seagulls. Understand?"

"What?" He remembered then the attachment she seemed to have formed with Hermione. "Okay, I get it. But,... all of that,... it was just a misunderstanding. Told her so. I went too far, aye,... but I meant no arm. Thought she was up for it. I,... misread the signals, that's all. Fuck's sake, it's like every man who ever asked a woman out's a rapist these days. It were just a misunderstanding, I told you."

"Like smashed window too? That was also misunderstanding? You are lying bastard."

Squinty began to regain some of his composure, though his spirit remained sensibly subdued with Helena still fizzing. "Nah, love. That were me temper. All right? And I'm sorry, okay? I'll see her right on that score. I promise."

"Is threat now? You threaten Hermione?"

"What? Nah,.. nah! Said I'd see her right, that's all. Pay for the fuckin' window, I meant. And apologise, on me bended knee if you want!

Thought she fancied me, that's all. And all right,... I fancied her,... single woman,... where's the harm? But it were a mistake."

"Mistake, for sure. Is no way she is fancying you." Imagining Squinty on his knees apologising gave Helena pause, and some later amusement. "She wants nothing from you. Nothing! And you stay away."

But Finn was hearing something else in the tone and volume. This was more than simply Helena with her dander up. She had taken Hermione's near assault personally, was acting with the maniacal protectiveness of a lover. But more surprising to him was the tone in Squinty's voice, in which he'd detected a genuine, if somewhat gruff contrition, and Finn believed him.

Squinty had misjudged the situation that night, misjudged Hermione. He was a stupid, dirty old man, void of manners, and subtlety, and common sense, but beyond desperately hoping to get his end away with a woman he really fancied, and who he'd deluded himself into thinking fancied him, he had not meant any harm.

"It's all right, Helena," he soothed. "We should go now. Let Mr Mulligan recover the remains of his, em,... dog."

Helena coughed, wiped her cheek with the back of her hand, left there a trail of blood from a bleeding knuckle. "Is fine," she said. She felt a twinge from her back, a hint of the old trouble returning, bit her lip in defiance of it. "We go now." She returned to the car, closed herself in. Kyle joined her. Finn lingered a while, just to see Squinty on his feet. Squinty leaned back on the bonnet of the Landrover, shook his head, realised the punch had split his lip.

"Fuck,..." But it was an expletive expressed more in surprise, even respect, than anger at his encounter with Helena Aynslea. "Rather you than me there, mate."

"What?"

Oh, that again.

Finn sighed. Even Squinty thought he and Helena were at it. He turned away without enlightening him. It was none of Squinty's business.

The night had proved eventful. One minute he'd been investigating the

slow ticking of an old Accurist, the next he was faced with the revelation Squinty Mulligan was possibly smuggling drugs or something, to say nothing of the mounting evidence Helena's relationship with Hermione was much deeper than just good friends.

Did she have a crush on her?

Helena was not the sort to hide that sort of thing for long.

She would act on it.

He wondered if Hermione was ready for that or not. He wondered if she even knew. Then he dismissed it all as nonsense because Helena had spent these last months going to extraordinary lengths to make sure Finn and Hermione became lovers, and where was the sense in that if she wanted Hermione for herself in that same way?

No, Finn, they were good friends, loyal, passionate friends, that's all. The rest was just his lurid imagination. Hermione needed someone like that. They were each of them magnificent in their way, and together they would be unstoppable.

Together they could take on the whole damned world.

And he would do anything for either of them.

Anything!

Chapter Seventy One

Hermione dabs at Helena's knuckles with a ball of cotton wool, soaked in surgical spirit. "What you mean drugs?"

Helena winces as the spirit bites. "Drugs, *you know*? And Finn,... he makes up bull and cock story about dog's body."

"Helena, darlin' you're not makin' any sense. Now hold still, you softie. What dog's body's this then?"

They are in the darkened downstairs of the café, moonlight spilling across the tables, Helena, her coat draped around her shoulders, scowling and queenly while Hermione now applies sticking plaster.

"Body of dog. But is not dog. I know. Mulligan is burying something up there, drugs maybe. Then he goes to dig it up, and we catch him at it."

"You don't know for sure,... I mean about it being drugs. Could be anything. Might even be just the body of an old dog, like Finn said."

"Finn knows it is not dog's body. So, I ask myself, is Finn involved with Mulligan, you think? Am I in business with criminal?"

"Slow down. Sounds to me like maybe Finn suspected it was something like drugs, like you did, but he was protecting all of you by giving Squinty a way out. Squinty really had a gun?"

"Big gun. Like big dick. But why give him way out?"

"'Cos otherwise he might have felt he had to use that gun."

Helena shakes her head, confused, her back still aching a little. "Maybe."

"Does Finn know you know?"

"No. I let him have his little fantasy. He thinks I am stupid woman, easily fooled."

"No, Finn's a good man. He was looking after you, that's all. Okay, so you drive him nuts at times, but he knows you're not stupid."

"Pfft. Gun was not loaded. There was no danger, except for danger to

Squinty Big Dick. From me."

"But it *might* have been loaded. You couldn't have known for sure." She slaps the table in exasperation, making Helena jump. "Oh, Squinty, you old fool! Smuggling stuff. That'll explain all those cops a while back. I've seen 'im goin' out in 'is boat, all weathers. Fishin' he says. Bringing stuff in more like! Cigarettes maybe - someone else down the harbour got busted for that last year,... but drugs is upping the game a bit. Oh, I hope you're both wrong 'bout that. Drugs is the last thing we need comin' into Carrickbar."

"Well, soon will end in jail. Then no more fishing for Squinty Big Dick."

"You won't,... grass him up, will you?"

"What? No,... I do not grass to police. Is principle, especially in oppressive state. But why you care?"

"Not 'is fault is it?"

"Oh,... you are strange one, Hermione. I thought your old boyfriend was drug dealing low-life tosspot. That not his fault either?"

"Brian? Course it was. Bastard."

"Then is also Squinty's fault. Listen he can pump gas, repair cars, run campsite. Hard work, yes, but honest living. Instead no, he makes easy money, bringing misery. He turns Carrickbar into toilet for drugs flush into England. Gives bad name to place while you work hard to give good name. You clean up. Give hope. He feeds despair, makes mess. And gropes women. I would like to,..."

"I know, I know,... cut his balls off. You're right. I'm too soft."

"You cannot save him, Hermione. You should be plotting revenge on him for what he did to you, not finding ways to forgive him."

Hermione blushes. What a stupid thought! Save Squinty, indeed. And forgive him? She changes the subject quickly: "Who's this woman he's with, then?"

"Who cares? Maybe she is accomplice."

"More likely she doesn't know anything about it. Like I didn't with

Brian."

"You save her too?"

Hermione begins to feel a little tearful, frustrated by Helena's abrasive needling. "What? I don't know,... well,... why not? Why shouldn't I? There's all of us got at least a spark of somethin' worth savin'. An if we all looked out for each other a bit more, the world would be a nicer place, wouldn't it? But there's no profit in it, is there, bein' decent with folks. And that's why the world's like it is. And getting worse."

Helena is moved by the sentiment, realises it is this, in part, that draws her to Hermione, if only because she feels Hermione needs protecting from herself. "Listen, your country is in dark times. I read history, and it is like nineteen twenties now. And in dark times, family is important. You make tight family. Look out for family. Survive that way. Also, if you are running around trying to save everyone all the time,... there is less time for you to be saving,..."

"Saving who? Finn? I think Finn's okay. He'll be okay now."

"Not Finn. Me. I want you to save me, Hermione."

The café, already quiet, takes on a more profound silence and Hermione feels a swelling in her breast.

Did she imagine it, or had Helena had actually said that?

"How many people do you need to save you, Helena? You already got Finn running round like a little puppy dog." There was some resentment there, she thought - not really meant as obviously as that, but she let it ride as a warning, just so Helena would know she was watching, and keeping score,... except,... of course she wasn't keeping score at all. She didn't mind Finn running around at Helena's beck and call - indeed was quite happy to share him that way, amused by Finn's embarrassment whenever Helena hugged him.

She takes Helena hands, presses them. "Helena, are you all right? Back troubling you again?"

Helena allows her hands to be held, lets them go soft, compliant, nods. "It will pass. Knee to Mulligan's balls has moved something. But I swear I am not on medication when I tell you this."

Hermione snorts, tries to avoid Helena's increasing directness. "Love to have seen you do that."

Helena smiles in reminiscence. "Yes, it was very satisfying."
"You did it for me?"

Helena nods.

Hermione feels a glow. She'd told Finn not to make a thing of it, told him to keep away from Mulligan. It was what she told herself she wanted, but Finn need not have taken any notice and done it anyway, surely, if he loved her? Such are the paradoxes of love."Frighten me to death, you stupid cow."

"I do?"

"You don't need much lookin' after from what I've seen."

"But I am nicer person when I am with you. And I want to be nice person. Like you."

Hermione looks into Helena's eyes. They're big and sparkling, her pupils deep wells of blackness, but surely that doesn't mean what it usually means? She shakes her head, shakes it away, that odd feeling of intimate warmth. "What else you want from me? Already told you I'd do anything."

"No you have already told me you will not do *everything*."

Hermione points a warning finger. "Don't start on that again."

Helena pouts, glances away, momentarily stung, says nothing.

Hermione takes a breath: "Okay, listen. Let me just test this out on you: Ages back, when gay blokes were afraid of coming out, like,... you know? They'd have this arrangement with a girl. They'd go out, do stuff, give the impression they were,... an item, when all the time she was just a cover for him while in private he went around doing boys. They call girls like that a beard. And I've been wondering, Helena, all of this scheming,... getting me and Finn together,... then this teasing thing, this flirting with me,..."

"What? You think I make beard for you with Finn?"

"Well, are you?"

"I don't need beard. For many reasons I don't need beard. This is permissive society, I want woman, I take woman. Want man, take man. Enough! But I am not Lesbian, Hermione. I am,... Helena."

"Damn right you are. Then what you keep comin' onto me for?"

Helena thinks on this for a while. "There are reasons. But most of all I think it is because you want me to. And I am happy to please you in this respect. Tell me if I am wrong. It is,... good fun between us, this banter. This flirting?"

Some things are best left unsaid. Some thoughts are best left buried. Of course Hermione has thought about it, and yes she has thought she wants Helena to want her, but she would never say so. What then to say when Helena says she knows it's true? Her heart is beating hard when she replies: "It's fun, yes. Kind of cheeky,.. you're good to be with, Helena, but I'm with Finn. Your friend. Your business partner. He trusts us. What would he think to hear us talkin' like this?"

"Girls talk of many things they would never share with their men."

"You said that before, but this is different, because if he finds out,..."

"Why will he find out?"

"Because I'll tell him." Hermione nails it home with her eyes. Yes, she would tell Finn. Indeed she might even tell him tonight.

Helena is faced with the reality of this possibility and it sobers her. "Don't,... you must not say anything to Finn. You're right, it will,... confuse him. Like I said, it is bit of fun between us, that's all. We leave it at that."

"Confuse him, yes. Confuse all of us, only you don't seem to see it. It won't work, Helena. Got to see that. Now don't make me go back to hating the sight of you."

"Oh? You used to,... hate me?"

"'Course I did. Bossy cow in a fur coat, no knickers, and the airs of a queen. Who does she think she is? You know?"

Helena looks away, deflated. "Really?"

Oh,.. She's what? Hurt?

Hermione takes alarm. "Didn't mean it like that! Didn't know you then. Not properly. Oh, stop it, stop it. You're doing my head in."

Helena lets slip a smile, winks. No harm done. But she is still clearly troubled. "I'm sorry," she says. "Fur coat, yes - and *very* expensive, but not genuine. Really, darling, they are so passé. Bossy, yes of course I am. There is much bravado about me, mostly hollow, but you must tell no one about that. No knickers?... hmm,... sometimes, I admit this, but only in summer when I walk the beach in floaty dresses. And of course we cannot hurt Finn. I love him as much as you do. This is red line we do not cross. Absolute."

Hermione flashes her a look that manages to be both enquiring and a warning.

Helena reassures her. "All right. I love him *differently* to you. But I do love him. He is my husband. Father to Kyle. Father to Anica too, maybe?"

"Thought you didn't like Annie. Cut her ears off you said."

"That was,... medication talking. No,... she grows on me. She is brave girl. Good spirit."

This is news! "Oh? You wouldn't be trying to wheedle your way round me would you?"

Helena sits back, raises her hands, a gesture of surrender, of defeat. "All right. I am done here. We go round in circles. Thank you for first aid."

"Wait, don't go."

"Why not?"

"Not like this, not with anything,... well,... sort of hangin' between us. I'm sorry Helena."

"There is nothing hanging between us. I'm just a little tired. No sorries, Hermione. I love you, darling. I call you tomorrow."

"But,... we can't leave it here. Come up the flat for a bit, eh? I've got some wine in the fridge."

"So we drink, and make sad eyes at each other while Anica plays raspberry?"

"You mean gooseberry. But okay, I know what you mean."

"I am sorry, Hermione. I am bad girl. I want everything. And I want it now. But the thing is,..."

"What? What is it?"

"I am convinced time is running out for me. That's all."

"This operation thing? No. Look, there's a risk it could go wrong, like with any surgery, but it won't. And you can't avoid it, or next time the infection might see you off anyway. Got to do it, Helena. Just got to."

Helena drops her face into her hands, closes them over her eyes, and her hair closes over everything. For a while she stays like that, silent, still, barely breathing. For a moment Hermione is afraid Helena is weeping, and she's not sure how she'd deal with that. But she's not weeping. Helena is scared. Helena has run bang up against the brick wall of her mortality. Hermione ventures a hand to her arm, presses gently for comfort. Helena's eyes reappear, red ringed, tragic.

And then in a flash Hermione sees it. But can it really be so simple?

"Helena, darlin'. Is this you wantin' one last good shag before you go? With me?"

The darting smile tells Hermione she's right, but Helena is too embarrassed to say it out loud because it's so trivial, but yes, that's about what it boils down to, all of it simplified in that one trite, earthy admission.

One last good shag. With Hermione!

No way!

But for all of that Hermione is deeply moved, her eyes filling. "You want someone to make love to you, all tender like, and well,... loving and

kind. I mean, who doesn't? But I can't do that for you, darlin'. Never done it with a woman before, not even sure I can. I mean,... I think I might,... with you, with practice, and in time, if we were both free and maybe well-bladdered too for starts. Sure, then maybe I'd be up for that, but safer not to, eh? No, what you need's a man for that."

Helena raises her chin in defiance. "Definitely not. No more men for Helena. Ever. Not in that way."

Hermione persists: "You don't mean it. How 'bout Finn? Finn would do it. He could be that way with you. I know, because he's like that with me. And if I'd not got to him first, you could easily have had him if you'd set your mind to it,... still could. Trust me, he wouldn't take much persuadin' "

What? What are you saying Minnie?

I dunno, it just kid of slipped out,... fuck!

Helena's eyes widen in alarm. "But Finn would never do that! Not now. He is good man, and he's with you."

"Might do. If I told him,..."

Minnie!

"What? Hermione, I think you overestimate the degree of his submissiveness. And it was you who told me three-way is fine for porno flick but in real life man is more like to run away screaming."

"No, you didn't let me finish. I meant to say if I told him he and I,... needed some space. For a bit. Then you just,... take advantage of that."

"Space? What is this space? Is English translation for dumping him?"

"Sort of,... but I wouldn't mean it. I love him. I love you. You get your shag, then he and I make up."

Helena is puzzled, a little moved, but adamant: "This is,... outrageous, Hermione. Is,... perverted. Even by my standards it is,...disgusting. How can you think of such a thing? And Finn,.. poor Finn,... he is more likely to end up hating both of us."

Hermione feels chastened. Helena is genuinely shocked, yet not shocked to be asking Hermione for a,... what? What is she asking for, exactly?... "I just don't know how else to do it."

"Well, me neither, except,.. it will not be like that! You finish with Finn, we both lose him. He becomes house-husband for genius shrink lady, fix broken watches no one want on side. But,... Hermione?.... you'd do *that*?"

Hermione backs away. "Course I fuckin' wouldn't. I mean,... who do you think you are? Wouldn't do that for nobody."

No, of course she wouldn't. Except Helena had already done it, for her. But talking with Helena is like thinking out loud, and sometimes Hermione's thoughts roll in strange ways, to say nothing of Helena's.

"Talking like we are drunk, Hermione. As usual." She laughs, flutters her eyebrows theatrically. "How you intoxicate me, darling."

But Hermione's thinking of something else now: "You're telling me there's a chance of Finn going off with Carina?"

"What? No. Absolutely not."

"You do. You must do. You said so."

"I think we forget this. We also forget this crazy conversation. I hire prostitute,... or escort or something. Take care of last shag that way."

"Oh, but you wouldn't really,... would you,... like *demean* yourself that way?"

"No. Of course not. If I was a man I would tie knot in it, face surgeon's knife as virgin."

"You mean celibate."

"I mean,... nothing. I go now. You confuse me enough."

"I confuse *you?"*

"Enough, already we talk like lovers, arguing. You see Finn tonight?"

Hermione nods.

"Make excuse. Don't."

"Why?"

"Because everything we have said tonight is written in your face, and Finn is not so simple as he looks. He will read it there."

"Think we both know Finn's not simple, Helena. What's he see in me though? Maybe we should get in touch with Carina,... maybe she's better for him anyway."

"No! Carina does not need this man, not like we do."

"And maybe she knows that, but she's Finn's friend and maybe she could help. She sounds,... wise."

Absolutely not. I forbid this, Hermione. She is wise, yes. And I am sure if Finn had not met us here in Carrickbar, she would by now be joining him."

"But you said."

"Oh, stop. I no longer remember what I said!"

"What do we need him for, Helena? I mean, I love him, but if he doesn't love me, doesn't love *us*,... he should be with someone else, right? It's not fair just using him for odd jobs and stuff and a quick bonk now and then?"

"Is more than quick bonk already, Hermione - at least for you. You know this. Love is choosing, and for sure we make choice for him in this. It's us or no one else for Finn Finucane."

"You sound,..."

"Hmm,... what is sound like?"

"Like a possessive b,... bunny boiler, or somethin'"

"Bunny boiler? What is this? Possessive? Sure I am. Possessive for husband and father for Kyle, but not for lover. You are Finn's lover Hermione. He is my husband."

"But a husband means,..."

"Oh,... fuck's sake, Hermione! For women of our age, husband means simply man we can rely on. This is Finn. There is nothing weird in sharing him that way. And Finn won't even know. As for Helena's lover, I would like that to be you. If for one time only."

There it was said. It was definitely said!

One time only?

But what about me, Helena?

What if one time is not enough, for me?

What?

Hermione's face is on fire. She's reddening with emotion, with embarrassment, with the strangeness of things, to say nothing of her feelings for Helena. "Listen, you daft mare. This operation isn't going to kill you, right? It's going to fix you up, so you've got to start thinking beyond it. You're mixing us all a whirlwind, but remember this: it'll be *you* caught in the middle of it come this time next year - not just me and Finn and Kyle. You're not thinking it through to the long term, and you've just got to. Okay?"

They're quiet for a while, then Helena tests the water: "So,... you're saying there is no way you can do this for me?"

Hermione looks at her, drawn in once more by those big eyes, feels a tingle, is at the same time seduced and repelled.

Oh,... fuck.

"Just,... lemme think about it, okay?"

Chapter Seventy Two

Squinty came back that night with a limp and a cut lip and no good explanation for any of it, not that he felt he needed one. In the complex mind-game of wooing Nina, explanations of himself did not figure much. If she was to be won, he reasoned, it would not be by making himself appear in any way submissive or vulnerable, or weak.

He worked until two in the morning, opened the filthy, earth smeared bag, which contained smaller bags of cannabis, and which he could more easily fit inside the tyre. It seemed a lot of trouble for such a small amount of merchandise, considering the effort and the risks involved - and not just *his* risks. They were clearly just testing the route, testing him, seeing how safe a pair of hands he was.

Finally, he changed the plates on the car and made ready to back it out onto the forecourt. Meanwhile, Nina watched all of this discretely, intermittently, under pretence of bringing coffee and toast to the workshop to warm him, to keep him going.

His knuckles were huge, she noted, inflamed from countless snaggings against immovable objects, his fingers gnarled and ingrained black with long years of oily work. Oh, yes, this man could work, had worked hard all his life and this impressed her, if he could but see it. That he had not made more of himself was not a puzzle to her. It was the same the world over, an attitude from the rulers of society that those who worked with their hands should take on more the demeanour of slaves, grateful for crumbs, that it would be robots in future that dug coal, laid brick, delivered mail. And even though all of that was bullshit, what then for clever hands? Yes, yes. Squinty had clever hands. And they had been too long idle, so the Devil had made work for them. This may not have been entirely true, but it was at least a plausible story that made sense of him. For now.

But her heart sank when she worked out what he was doing. It was not the realisation he was doing wrong so much that upset her, as the thought that in doing wrong he might already be a lost cause, that she had misjudged him, that she had been a fool for a man. Again.

Drugs!

Her home city was just another cess-pit in hoc to the drug lords now. There were so many drive-by shootings and maggoty corpses in the back alleys now the press rarely reported them. No one involved with

that business ever escaped it, everyone it touched was smeared for ever with it and anyone who rebelled, or got in the way met a violent end.

"What cher lookin' at," he growled. He was almost done, the last of the plates being screwed into place. He could feel Nina looking at him through the doorway to the workshop. He turned to see her, arms folded, severe.

"You are damned fool, John."

He wasn't expecting so confident, so resentful a come-back "Eh?"

"You have potential here," she said. "Small business, modest profit, yes, but viable with right attitude. Why you do this bad thing?"

"That's none of your business, love. Now bugger off and let me finish up. And you've seen nothin', right? Nothin'."

Nina gave him a reproving sigh, then turned on her heel and went to her room. There, she locked the door and sat, pondering her future anew. It was bad enough the money she was taking from Squinty was bypassing the taxman, because only rich people dodged their taxes, right? while the poor went to prison if they tried to do the same, but it was quite another thing, a much darker thing, that the money in her tin was stained with blood.

It wasn't entirely Squinty's fault, she reasoned - the fix he was in. He wasn't particularly clever, leastways with his head. That tended to leave people vulnerable to making bad decisions, and she'd made enough of those herself recently.

She heard the car being driven back onto the forecourt, and by daylight, when she took the dog out to the beach, it had gone. It made her shiver that there were shadows watching, even here, on the edge of the world, eyes in the night, drifting through doors. If she was to run it would need to be quietly, sneak herself away. She had the money to do it now, get herself to London, get her Passport back - only she was afraid, she told herself. Afraid of the shadows.

Or was it really that she did not want to go?

She looked up the promenade at the Sea View Café, the first rays of a weak sun coming over the hill to light it up, a warm and hopeful shade

of amber. It would be a nice day. And it would be nice too, one morning to go into the café, to sit down with confidence, like a regular person and drink coffee. The woman who ran it looked pleasant enough, and she imagined chit-chatting with her. There had been a man on the beach too, shy, warm, friendly,... human! Sure Carrickbar was a welcoming place. It had,... potential.

She'd heard Squinty coming up the stairs in the small hours. There'd been the usual momentary pause on the landing by her door. It was as if he'd been thinking of her, thinking perhaps of knocking, of coming to her, of attempting to do what he'd so clearly wanted to do from the start. The first few nights she'd slept there, she'd been afraid he'd force himself on her and had lain awake, nursing a rolling pin - a useful weapon, not as deadly as a knife, but less likely to land her in jail. But he never did it. It was always the same, just the pause, the implied thought, before he moved on.

There were other men she had known who would not have hesitated. The bruiser in Manchester would have thought nothing of it, but his preference had been for boys, or she would have been in real trouble there - more trouble than a burst nose. She was not entirely sure Squinty did not have such a streak as that in him, but she suspected not, suspected in fact he was just a bit simple in that way, a bit adolescent, and in any case she had reasoned by now it was manageable.

Sure, she could manage it.

Manage him.

"Sorry, love," he said.

After walking the dog, she had made him a breakfast of bacon and eggs, brought it to him in the little dining room, neat cloth on the table, pot of tea. He seemed to like that sort of thing, being looked after. And he was not ungrateful.

"I mean about what I said, last night," he went on," sheepishly. "Like,... the way I spoke. You know? Sharp. Didn't mean it. Just,... tryin' to look out for you that's all."

He had not slept well. She saw that. His eyes were bloodshot, his lip swollen, and he had nicked himself several times shaving. The shaving was odd, she thought, for he did not always bother of a morning, but

he had scraped himself raw, brushed his hair, as if for a special occasion.

Or a woman.

She shrugged, squeezed off a smile, made to back away. It mattered nothing to her, she told her self, but then he asked her to sit, so she sat. It was a curious dance this dance of theirs - she moving close enough to entertain, to win trust so she did not feel like a prisoner here, but not so close she sacrificed her virtue.

"It's not what it looks like," he began. "No,... I mean,... all right, it *is* what it looks like, but it's a tradition in these parts, see? Bit of smuggling, like. Bugger all else left to be honest. In olden times it were brandy, and Catholic priests. Hard to think it, eh? Used to bring em in from Ireland - the priests I mean. Then old Cromwell rounded 'em up and had 'em burned, poor bastards. Sorry,... not Catholic are you?"

Yes, Nina was Catholic - somewhat lapsed, but not beyond offering the occasional prayer. "So now it is drugs," she said. "We cannot compare priests to drugs. Is not the same, John."

"Eh? Well,.. 'course not. Mostly it's ciggies, you know?" He made a puffing gesture with an imaginary cigarette in his fingers. He looked comical and she wanted to smile, but it really wasn't funny.

"It will end badly. You see how they use you? You are nothing to these people. I came to work in the fields. Pick flowers, fruit, vegetables, but then they talk of using me on streets as prostitute, except I am older. Want younger girls for that – children even. There are no limits to their wickedness. This is now wicked, wicked world John, and all for money. I thought England would be safe, but it is not. It is just as bad as anywhere else."

"But,... you're safe here. I mean,.. with me. You're safe so long as you keep out the cities. Sure all cities are alike. All of 'em shit 'oles. But if you can keep away from shady characters you'll be all right."

Shady characters? Like you john?

"Yes, and I am glad to work for you this way. I have warm house and good facilities. When working fields I must share caravan with many other girls. No privacy, and toilet is bucket in corner of field. It is nice in Carrickbar, but it will end badly. Trust me on this. It will end with

policemen, and prison. Or the gang men will ask more of you, and if you refuse they will hurt you, and perhaps me too. They are watching John. They have eyes everywhere. They knew that car was ready to pick up."

"'Cos I rang and told 'em. As for coppers, they're too slow and stupid these days, love. And they've not the men to watch places like this any more - least not for long. They're all drafted into cities lookin' out for terrorists, checkin' up on people's passports. They're not interested in people like me."

"Not talking about police, John."

"You're worryin' over now't, love. I'm not in that deep. I'm in control, see? Like I said, a bit of smugglin's a tradition round here, that's all. No harm in it."

"You are fool, if you believe that. These are not olden times. These are bad time."

Of course Squinty didn't believe it, not really. He just got by day to day, deluding himself things were one way when in fact they were probably the opposite. "Look," he said, "that was my last job, okay? Next time I get the call, I'll say my boat's in for repairs. Can't do it see? Simple. And they'll find someone else. They'll soon forget about us."

Nina warmed unexpectedly to the sound of the word "us". The warmth came into her eyes, and emboldened him. "Want me to see if I can get your passport back? I can have a word next time I'm in Manchester."

She shook her head. "No, you must not speak with them. Ever. Why can you not understand? They make you do something in return for this. This is how they work, and they drag you in more deeply each time. And anyway, is not important. I get replacement from embassy. Simple."

Squinty was alarmed. "Eh? No, you can't do that. They'll ask questions, and you'll likely be deported, I mean, on account of this BREXIT thing,.. or something."

Nina rolled her eyes. "John, there is not official or politician in whole of Europe who understand BREXIT thing. Not for years maybe. Is formality to get passport back. And I am not illegal citizen. I am citizen of European Union. I have right to be here."

"Then,... Why n't cha run away from 'em, you daft cow? Why 'd'ja let yourself get dragged in?"

"Because I am afraid of them John. And they tell me they have nice job, in seaside, as housekeeper for English gentleman. And I think, okay, is worth try."

"So you're not,... afraid then? I mean of being here,... with me?"

"At first I worry. I worry you are like them, but now I think you are not. So, no I am not afraid here. I like to work for you. And,... Carrickbar is nice place."

"It is?"

"Of course. You will really tell them boat is broken next time?"

"Said so, didn't I?"

Nina knew of course it was not so simple. She wanted it to be. She wanted to believe him, but also knew it was wise not to. John Mulligan was simply that kind of man.

"And in summer, you will take me out in boat?"

"What? Go fishin', like?"

"Yes, I would like to go fishing with you. Grandfather was fisherman. I spend many hours in boat with him. I teach you."

He laughed. "What? 'bout fishin'. Like to see you try."

She warmed to his teasing. "For sure I will."

"Well, you're on then."

She nodded, rose from the table. "Your eggs are going cold, John."

"Aye,... well. Look, it'll be all right. You'll see."

Again the nod, a deep breath, a decision. "I don't think so. I am still happy to work for you. But you must be gentleman with me, John. Always."

Squinty was puzzled. Gentleman? Was he not being enough of a gentleman then? How did a gentleman behave around a woman anyway, beyond aspiring to shag her brains out? And if he was enough of a gentleman, might she warm enough to let him do it? Before he could reach any firm conclusions, the dog went wild, all but drowning out the rap at the door. Squinty looked shifty, as if considering bolting out of the back. Nina rolled her eyes, sighed chained the dog to the table leg, and went to answer.

She returned with a shrug.

Squinty was frozen to his chair. "Cops?"

"No, is a Mr Finn. He wants word with you."

What? Who?

Well, well,.. fancy pants Finucane! Come to get his hush money has he? We'll see about that. Sooner feed him to the fishes.

Chapter Seventy Three

Finn knew Helena knew it was not the body of a dog Mulligan had been digging up. That was too sentimental an act for a man who, up till now had displayed no sentiment whatsoever. What exactly he'd been recovering Finn could only guess, and could only speculate on whether there was anything else buried up at the campsite they should be worried about.

He'd lain awake all night, haunted by the memory of that gun, gleaming dull in the darkness, waving in an arc across the three of them - Helena, Kyle, himself. He'd been horrified by the smear of blood across Helena's face, but Helena had brushed away his solicitations, told him to go home.

"But thank you, Finn," she added in parting, a softener to sweeten his dreams.

For himself of course he'd been afraid to die, and that was the first time in his life he'd been faced with the possible suddenness of it. That was bad enough, but with Helena and Kyle there was a beauty involved as well, and when it came to beauty one was for ever deluded into thinking it was eternal in nature, that it was indestructible. To be reminded that it was not was all the more deeply disturbing.

The corruption of the gun, of Squinty Mulligan, and whatever dark business he had brought to Carrickbar threatened all of them. Something had to be done. Finn pondered contacting the police, but it was all deniable on Squinty's part, and Hermione's distrust of the police was infectious. She was right to a degree: one did not ask the time of policemen any more. They were too busy, too grumpy, too self absorbed,... and increasingly weaponised.

Accidents were inevitable.

It might have helped soothe his agitation had Hermione spent the night with him. She did more often than not these days, but had texted him to say she and Annie would be working late baking cakes for tomorrow - something about a late delivery, or something. She had not needed to explain, and the fact she had worried him. Lacking eye contact and emotional tone, text messages were convincing liars, also guilt triggers.

Had he upset her in some way? Neglected her? Was she tired of a

sudden of his being at the beck and call of Helena? But she had not seemed to mind before.

So,... Squinty Mulligan. Finn would have to speak to the man himself, handle it discretely, unlike last night, and this time leave Squinty in no doubt what was expected. Man to man.

Squinty slouched against the door frame, king of his castle, dog barking in the house behind so Finn could barely hear the man's contemptuous greeting: "Well? What does't tha want?"

What did he say?

Finn heard the woman shouting at the dog and the dog moderated its tone to a growling whine. He had seen the mess a dog could make of a man's leg, a child's face, seen it a plenty in the stats that crossed his desk from the A+E department, and the wild noise unsettled him.

"Can we talk?"

"I'm listening."

"Not here."

"Just say what you've got to say, then piss off. You're interrupting my breakfast."

Finn caught the woman's eye. She'd opened the door to him with a smile, but now wore a defensive frown that mirrored Squinty's. Was he up against them both here, or just the one?

"Thought you might want to go somewhere a bit more discreet, that's all," said Finn.

Squinty shrugged. "Here's fine."

"All right. I don't know what kind of business you're into, and I don't care. But if you've anything else buried up at the old campsite you need to move it today."

"Oh aye? Who says?"

"I'm not here to argue with you. I'm not here to fight. We'll be bringing in diggers, doing some landscaping, that sort of thing. If we dig

anything up that looks suspicious, we're not covering for you."

"Don't know what you mean."

Squinty wasn't impressed. He'd always taken Finn for a gutless creep and Finn's reasonable tone did nothing to dispel that notion now. "Not got your bodyguard with you this morning then?"

Presumably he meant Helena. No, thought Finn, or you'd be a bit more humble than this.

Aggression. Violence. These were not things Finn had much call for. They were Alpha Male things, and while Alphas had their uses, they could be difficult to deal with at other times. Not that Squinty was an Alpha - he was more aspirational, which is what made him sly, fox-like, underhand, cunning.

"I've said what I came to say, Mr Mulligan. So I hope we can agree, that's an end to it."

Squinty had nothing else hidden up at the campsite, and it looked like Finucane wasn't angling for any money either, so there was no problem here to be solved. But Squinty was feeling sore after last night, and wanting a bit of a comeback, and needling Finn was all he could think of. "You and her," he smirked. "Who would have thought it? Her and that retarded kid of hers. Got your work cut out there all right. She must be a good shag, that's all I can think. Wouldn't touch her with a barge pole myself, mind - where's she from anyway? Fuckin' foreigners, coming over ere with their airs and graces like they own the fuckin' place. Fuck knows how many have been up her."

Taunting?

Finn wasn't sure he was hearing this right. He was trying to be straight, magnanimous, and the man was *taunting* him, like a child.

Remember agape, Finn!

Carina now.

No way Carina. I'm done here.

"Just get rid of anything else that's up there. You've got twenty four hours."

"Should have blown your brains out, the lot of you."

"Then you would have gone to prison,."

"Whyn't you call the cops anyway? You wouldn't have anything to hide yourselves would you? That kid up the cafe, Anica,.. she legal?"

Squinty was suddenly conscious of Nina listening at his shoulder, remembering she was also one of these damned foreigners comin' over 'ere, except he wanted to shag this one, remembering too her English was much better than he'd been led to believe, and he wanted her to like him too, wanted her to think he was a gentleman - well, he *was* a gentleman, except here he was poking sharp sticks at Finn Fucking Fancy-Pants Finucane.

"All right," he said. "Sorry, about that. I was out of order there."

Finn wasn't sure he'd heard properly over the whining of the dog. "Eh?"

"Only ribbing you. Took me by surprise last night and I reacted all wrong. There's now't else up there. You can rest assured on that. It were just me owd dog, like we said. No 'ard feelins I hope?"

Hard feelings? Finn was burning with resentment at having Helena and Kyle, and Anica so vilely disrespected, so yes, there were considerable hard feelings. "Well,... I'm not sure I can speak for the good shag and her retarded son but, speaking for myself I'm prepared to forget the whole thing."

"Aye,... well,... like I said. I was out of order there.. She's a feisty one is what I meant,... and he's a good lad. Ow's he gettin' on wi that bike?"

Finn wasn't sure exactly what scene of madness was being enacted now. The change in Squinty's tone was clearly for the woman's benefit - Finn still didn't know her name - but judging by her expression it was having as much success in fooling her as it was Finn.

The bike, yes, and the oily, duplicitous John (Squinty) Mulligan. That wasn't a lesson he was likely to forget in a hurry. Some people you could not love. There had to be an opening into their heart, a moment of vulnerability, of humility,... *Carina talking again*. But without it there was no way Finn could view Squinty in anything other than a wholly negative light. He was everything Finn did not want to be himself - dirty, dishonest, lecherous.

In the end Finn recoiled from the man, as he always did, wondered what madness of his own had brought him there, thinking he could reason with him. He turned away, headed across the road to the beach for some sea air to clear his nose of the stench of dishonesty. He'd said his piece, given Squinty the opportunity to get at anything else he wanted from the campsite. Anything else they dug up from now on, the police would be told about it.

He didn't believe Squinty for a minute when he'd said there was nothing else hidden up there and he worried now the whole campsite scheme was tainted with the threat of disaster from the outset, that Squinty had somehow cursed it, sowed the land with the seeds of everyone's destruction. He would tell Helena to put it back on the market, to forget the whole damned thing.

He took a deep breath. The tide was in, the sea washing in and out, a calming rhythm, a thin crescent of sand to walk. Easy, Finn. Don't let him get under your skin. It's still a good idea.

The campsite.

The paradox of the woman was striking. She seemed a decent sort, whoever or whatever she was - pleasant smile, something sympathetic about her. What would anyone like that by choice have anything to do with such a foul reprobate as Squinty Mulligan?

He walked out along the tide line, past the Sea View, beyond Helena's house whose windows peeped over the dunes, as if Helena herself were watching him. He hoped she was okay. He'd weather her expletives, and call to see her later, discuss what should be done over the campsite.

There was no view of the Isle of Man this morning, just a blank greyness and a low, thin mist, but the day was warm.

Well, do you see it, Finn?

Sure, I see it, Dad.

But what did he see?

Nothing.

He had not even seen the coming of his father's death.

Always on the wrong foot, poised for calamity.

He walked out to the fringes of the marsh, as was becoming his habit. The marsh seemed always to contain him, a marsh to the north, a marsh to the south. The only other options were the sea, and heading back inland, back to where he came from, back in time to the old pain, and to the grass at home which would by now be shin high.

Helena had counselled him that Carrickbar was not a prison, and it wasn't exactly, more the centre of the dilemma of his life.

He turned back for the Cafe, aware now of a figure walking towards him, indistinct at first in the heat shimmer. He thought it was Hermione and his heart leaped at the chance of seeing her, of being with her, and they'd only been apart for less than a day. What else was that if it was not love?

But it wasn't Hermione. It was,... Squinty's woman.

Still some distance apart, Finn aimed his course more inland to avoid her, hugging the dunes, but the tide contained them both and she tracked him, homing in like a slow seeking missile. Clearly, she wanted to talk. He'd pulled the lid off something and he wanted to avoid it but it was now coming right at him: another complication. He sighed, submitted himself as an easy target, sat down in the dunes, hoping still she'd pass him by, but she didn't.

She came to him, eyes shaded with her palm. She looked vulnerable, but also calculating - a near impossible combination to pull off without exposing guile, but she managed it somehow and though he saw through her, he also admired her for it.

"Mr Finn?"

"Yes."

"I can ask you something?"

"Sure."

"There is bad blood between you and John Mulligan?"

"I,... don't suppose we'll ever be friends. Sorry, I don't know your name,...."

"Nina."

"Nina. I've nothing more to say, really, about John Mulligan. I don't know him that well, don't want to know him at all to be honest. If you want to know what happened between us last night, you need to ask him, except he'll either not tell you or he'll just lie."

"You can't tell me what is problem between you?"

"There isn't one, so long as he stays away from the campsite, and away from my,... girlfriend." He felt a bit old to be using that word: 'girlfriend'. Was Hermione his girlfriend, or was she his woman? Subtle distinction, Finn.

"Oh?" Nina sat down, uninvited. She'd been right then about Finn. He was not part of the problem, not part of this smuggling business. This was more about male territory, and a female. These were things she understood.

"I really don't want to talk about it, Nina. I,... I don't know you,... don't know who you are,... what you are to John. You seem nice,... but,..."

"Me and John?" she sighed. "This is complicated story." She cupped her palms, scooped up a handful of sand and let it run out slowly between them, as if to measure time, or to bide her time, while she thought how best to answer. Then she took a leap and for the first time since coming to England, since the first punch in the mouth had silenced her, she opened up and spoke her mind.

"He works for bad people. People who take my passport and agricultural workers certificate. I come to England thinking I am to pick vegetables on farm in Lancashire, end up as housekeeper for part time smuggler of drugs."

"I'm not sure I want to be hearing this."

Nina seemed not to care if he wanted to hear it or not. It was more that she needed to say it, and Finn struck her as a good listener, so she continued in the same matter of fact tone. "He makes light of it, this smuggling. But is very bad situation for him."

"So,... you're not involved in any of that?"

"In smuggling? No. I don't know exactly what I'm doing here really. At first I think to keep myself safe by being useful to him, and nice, to win trust. He pays me money to keep house. I save it in a tin. I plan to escape to railway station, buy ticket to London and Polish Embassy. Get passport back. Go home."

"Sounds like a good idea. Sounds like you need to do that. Yes. Definitely."

"Except, I like it here. I have travelled a long way in search of new life. I have seen troubles sure, but I am trying to put them behind me. And I like John Mulligan. There is decent side to him, I think. He is not a bad man, just foolish."

"Mulligan? No,... he's unredeemable, Nina. A bad sort all round. Anyway I really don't want to be hearing this. He's nothing to do with me."

Nina carried on, as if thinking out loud now, weighing up the options, the pitfalls, the possibilities: "But if I run away, these bad men, they will punish him. I mean they will really hurt him, because he is fooled into thinking he is minding me for them. Or maybe they ask him to do something very bad, very dangerous to make up for it. So I don't run away. Because I am fond of him. Am I foolish in that? You tell me, Mr Finn. I don't know."

"Well, I can hardly claim a monopoly of common sense, Nina, especially recently. I came to Carrickbar escape my own problems, my own foolishness, maybe ended up making a fool of myself all over again. I don't know - that's just how it is with relationships, I suppose. But my advice is to clear out, forget about him."

"But he is not really bad, just over his head in something bigger than him. You seem kind, and sorry for confessing all of this to you."

Finn looked at her, tried to read her, but her expression was inscrutable. She wanted what? To make a friend out of him? But Finn already had more women friends than he could cope with and Nina was,... well,.. sleeping with the enemy. Possibly. Except, Squinty wasn't the enemy, not exactly - just someone most people could not bring themselves to love.

"You're in a difficult position," he said. "For myself I wouldn't lose much sleep over him. You'll find he has no friends among decent people around here. He's a cheat and a scoundrel, and he treats women badly." That sounded insufferably snobbish, he thought, and regretted saying it.

"But can we redeem him, Mr Finn?"

"Can we be bothered?"

Nina frowns. "What exactly did he do to your girlfriend?"

"Well, again I'd suggest you ask him, but he'd only lie, and tell you she led him on."

She nodded in understanding. "Ah. Like that,... I see. And did she? Lead him on."

"Let's just say he has difficulty understanding the word 'no'."

Finn felt he should be more sympathetic, but how could he trust anyone who shared a roof with Mulligan? "Don't mess about, Nina. If you're going to run, do it. If I can drive you somewhere, let me know. But don't hang around him and expect not to get hurt."

"Thank you for you offer. You are kind person."

"He obviously doesn't keep you prisoner."

"No. It is complicated arrangement. Sometimes prisons have open doors, and it is fear that keeps us locked inside."

"Well, if you get the chance, come up to the Sea View. But John's not welcome, understand? Hermione won't have him in there now. You'd have to come alone. We're all friends there. We can help you. If you want."

"Hermione is your girlfriend? And she runs the Sea View? I have seen her,.. running in the mornings. I know who you mean. Yes, it would be nice to talk with her. Okay. I will go back now. You will walk with me?"

"Better not. If Squinty,... I mean Mulligan, sees us together,...."

"You are afraid he will fight you?"

"No. He won't fight me. I'm pretty sure he's a coward - only feels safe with a gun in his hands. It's you I'm worried about. He'll beat you black and blue. He strikes me as being a bit backward in that way."

She shakes her head. "You are wrong about John, you know? Is it your girlfriend at the cafe you are worried will see us?"

No, Finn wasn't worried about that, but Nina was definitely wrong about Mulligan. If he knew she'd been talking to Finn, walking with Finn, it would inflame him. Somehow he had made a possession out of her. He'd exploited her, controlled her by what he saw as her need. It's what bad people did - imprison others and control them. It was only good people who set others free.

"I'll walk with you as far as the cafe," he said.

"Okay. And don't worry Mr Finn. Where John Mulligan is concerned, I look after myself."

Chapter Seventy Four

"Autumn, Finn. Helena's not thinking beyond the autumn, and this operation."

He and Hermione are watching the sunset from the harbour wall. But it's melting more than setting, dissolving into a butter stain long before it touches the horizon, weeping into the sea and the clouds and the western sky. The air has lost its bite. There is at last the breath of summer in it.

Finn is distracted - still thinking of Nina, a prisoner but not a prisoner in the house across the street, behind them, gambolling her life-chances on an old rogue like Squinty Mulligan. What does she see in him that Finn cannot? God help her.

"Hmm?"

"Helena?"

"Yes."

Sure, he's aware of Helena's fatalism. It's as if she knows something they do not, and it worries him that even if this is not the case, such things can be self fulfilling, that in order to live one must be fully expecting to do so at all times.

Hermione shakes her head, resisting other thoughts that are bubbling up, threatening to break the surface. She's not told Finn everything yet, everything about her and Helena, that is, but she's made up her mind she's going to tell him tonight, when the moment is right, if she can only steer him in a comfortable direction. "She strike you as a little,... mad sometimes? Things she says?"

Mad? Of course, yes. It's one of the more obvious things about Helena Aynslea, that imperious, overly self confident, spiky madness, a madness that makes all things simple, and possible, and seductive. But he's not fully listening, still thinking of Nina, wondering if Helena could help, if he should talk to her about Nina, if he should talk to Hermione.

About Nina.

"I think what she's been through she's excused a little madness," he

says. "And it's a kind of madness we want to believe in, isn't it? Isn't that part of what's so remarkable about her, so attractive?"

"That 'n you wantin' to shag her brains out." Hermione is already smiling, ready for his exasperated denial. "Sorry," she says. "But she keeps telling me you're her husband, and I don't know what she means by that."

"Well, obviously she doesn't mean it literally."

"Well, *obviously* I don't understand what that means. I mean,.. what other way is there? And since she already has a husband,.. somewhere,..."

"When you've been married a long time - talking decades here - you can sort of settle into a comfortable familiarity, and with some couples it's even sexless. Can't remember the last time Kathleen and I made love – years and years probably. But we still got on, you know? Slept together - at least those nights she was home. And towards the end I didn't miss it. We sort of outgrew it."

"Well, you might think *you* outgrew it. As for Kathleen, it was more like 'cos she was shaggin' someone else. Right? Sorry. Again."

"It's okay, and yes, you're right. About that."

"And what do you mean *outgrew* it? Don't you go outgrowin' it with me, mister."

He laughs. "It's unlikely. It's been lovely discovering that side of things again with you. But sometimes you don't need sex to make things good, and maybe that's how it is with me and Helena. Like she's already an ex-wife or something - we just skipped the bit in the middle - the bit when we were actually, you know, married. And now we're amicably divorced. I enjoy being with her, talking to her, of course I do, like I know you do, but I could never live with her.

"Okay, that works,... just about. Funny but she said somethin' similar. And I don't think I could live with her neither. All them fussy nick-nacks gatherin' dust." She nodded, frowned, swallowed it, digested it: "Ex-wife." It felt right. "We've both been seduced by her craziness, haven't we? We want to believe in everything she says, want the impossible to be possible again. But what if she's just plain crazy?"

"Does it matter? Dreams can be crazy but if they feel good, where's the harm? Anyway I thought you liked her."

"More n' that, I love her, Finn. And so do you. But,..." *Okay, Hermione, here goes*: "it's not,... well,... you she wants bringing her to an earth floaty climax one last time, afore she goes, is it? It's me she wants to do that for her."

There. It was said.

Finn does not react at first. A part of him is still walking along the beach that morning with Nina, a companionable silence between them, and he does not at first understand the word 'climax' in this context. Instead, he takes a deep breath, enchanted by the twinkle of the waves, and the red dots of the new parasols in the tea garden. It's the first day they have been used, the first day customers have sat out, and Hermione and Annie have taken orders in fresh spring air and sunshine.

Amid an air of renewal and hope.

Then he catches up with himself: "Eh?"

"You heard. She wants me to,... *you know*. Tickle her fancy,... sort of thing. Says it's like,... girl stuff,... and nothin' complicated, and nothin' to get hung up about. And maybe,... well,... you know me,.. I could shag a brush handle at times,... so maybe I could even do that, but it wouldn't not be complicated, would it? Well, not for me it wouldn't, and I am gettin' hung up about it, 'cos she keeps goin' on about it, even though a part of her's only jokin', only I'm not sure which part, and she knows you and me are sort of,.. steady like. So what's she playin' at, Finn? What the fuckin' ell's she playin' at?"

He and Hermione were sort of steady, like?

Well of course they were.

But,..

"You're saying you're in love with her? I mean like *that*."

"What? No, you pillock. I mean,... I love her. Already said that. But this,... this family thing. It's got to have some rules or it's not going to work. It's just going to,... to fuckin' well explode, you know? Got to have

some red lines, she says, but then she keeps crossing 'em like life's too short to care about such stuff, and I guess that's it with her. She thinks her time is short." Hermione shakes her head, watches him closely, afraid of his reaction.

Because a lot is riding on it Finn, you do know that don't you?

Finn takes another breath, longer this time, leans more heavily on the rail.

Love?

What he feels for Hermione goes deeper than any other kind of loving. He knows that, but is it just the sex that makes the difference? Is this the permission-to-bonk kind of love, as Carina put it? And without the sex, without the permission to bonk, what difference is there in his relationship between Hermione and Helena, or Hermione and Carina?

Is there any? Are not all these women simply interchangeable concepts in that respect? And Nina too since this morning, though none of the others know about that bit yet. All he knows for sure is his life would be less complete without any one of them. Except Nina. He could really do without worrying about Nina right now.

"Finn, Darlin'? You listenin' You know what I'm sayin' here? Do I need to spell it out."

"No,... I mean. Yes, I'm listening, and no you don't need to spell it out. I think I get the picture. So,... em,... Helena's kind of,... Lesbian? I mean, that would explain a lot."

No it wouldn't Finn. It would merely simplify things, not explain them.

The question, Finn darlin', is not whether Helena is or is not,... but more what she 'wants' from Hermione.

Hermione sighs. He's a strange one all right, or maybe it's an age thing. "Look,... I dunno. It's not so clear cut, Finn. But,... no, she's not. Absolutely not. And anyway, horny as I am there's no way I'm munchin' on no,... p,... pussy. I mean even if I was single, cos I'm not like that neither,... least I didn't think I was."

"But you could? You said, I mean,... in certain ways. You could,... *touch* her."

"Touch? You mean, well, fingers,.. like? Well, yea but,..."

"Then maybe,..."

"What?"

"Maybe,... I don't know,... maybe it would be all right."

"Finn!" She turns away, sharp. This is not what she's expecting him to say, and even though it's nothing she has not been contemplating herself, what hurts is the possibility he could only say such a thing if he did not love her. If he loved her he could not tolerate her sexual intimacy with anyone else but him,...

But he's not, is he?

Fuck's wrong with you, Finn?

"Em,... sorry, Hermione. That came out a bit,... wrong,..."

Yes, it did,...

"No, it came out clear enough. So, I'll just go dive right into her muff then, shall I?"

Wait, what's that? What's he sayin' now?

"No, but,...."

"But what?"

"She's,... afraid, right?"

Hermione nods. Sure. Helena's deeply, deeply afraid. *Think we've established that, Finn.*

"And we agree it's irrational, this fear she has, I mean that she won't live past the autumn, that this operation is going to go wrong, when in fact she'll still be here this time next year, still shouting at us and making our heads spin with her craziness?"

Does irrational mean the same as stupid, Minnie? Assume it does.

Again she nods, not sure she can yet speak to Finn without betraying her disappointment. But it's a weird kind of disappointment. She's willing to do it, Finn's willing for her to do it. Is she disappointed then in him, or in herself? Or is this not disappointment at all, more like guilt at the road she sees opening before her, and all the anger she should be feeling towards herself, she's turning onto Finn?

Oh, Minny, you ninny!

In spite of herself, she lets out a snort at the thought of Helena still driving them both nuts in a year's time - glorious, beautiful, mad, foul-mouthed Helena.

The Queen of Carrickbar!

Finn ploughs on. "She wants love,... sex,... t,... tenderness. I'd not seen it in her before, but you mentioned it a while back, when all this was kicking off. And who wouldn't want that?"

But then he's struck by the conflict, the sweet seductive impossibility of it and he slams the metal bar with the hammer of his fist, makes it ring. "Damn her. You've just got your life coming together after a really rough time. After everything you've told me. I mean look over there, look at the café. Doesn't it look great?"

"Looks nice, Finn, yes. But I'm not sure I see the connection."

"And me, I was feeling at ease at last, seeing a way through all the mess, and really happy to be here and,... to have found you,.. but all the time there's this mad woman testing us, pushing us, ripping through our lives like a,...

"Tornado?"

"Yes. But really, I'm sorry, Hermione. I just don't know how it is with girls. I'm terrified of them. I don't understand them at all. I want them to like me, I want to be,.. gentle with them,... make love to them,... because that's what men are supposed to do, right? Except I'm just frozen with embarrassment all the time."

"Could have fooled me."

"Look, with guys sometimes there's this locker room intimacy that girls would find weird and offensive. I just wondered if girls had something

similar, but different. You know,... more touchy feely."

"Not really, Finn. Least not outside your dirty mind they don't, okay?"

But if forgiveness was needed, she forgave him. And he didn't sound too far from the mark, actually. Touchy feely, indeed. Yes, she could be touchy feely with Helena, already had in fact - in a manner of speaking - touched her scar, and Helena's scar was more intimate, more guarded than her sex. If that was right or wrong, or tantamount to disaster was another matter and only time would tell.

But she needed more to go on from both of them, and right now, it would help a lot if Finn could simply say he loved her, but as usual she wasn't going to push him on it. Helena had told her of course, *the love thing*, but talking to Helena was like talking to someone permanently drunk; Helena was part fantasy, part myth - larger than life but never to be totally believed in.

"Look, Finn,... you're not,... well, a bit turned on or anything are you,... by the idea of your girlfriend getting it on with another woman-friend of yours? 'Cos that would be really stupid, okay? And a bit kinky. And not real. And bound to lead to hurt all round. Right? You do know that, don't you?"

It would be stupid, yes, but also Finn is indeed aroused to the point that his mind ceases to momentarily function beyond providing him with images of Helena and Hermione. Together. Like that! Not,... doing it,... but just curled together on soft pillows, content, safe in each other's embrace,... beautiful! If he could witness that but once in his life,...

"Of course not," he says. "I know it would be stupid."

Stupid, Finn. Stupid!

Inwardly he groans.

Hermione sighs. Yes, the café looks really, really nice this evening. And yes, damn Helena Aynslea and her fur coat (not real) and no knickers (sometimes apparently). And the way she does your head in all the time.

"You won't say anythin' to her 'bout all of this, will you, Finn? Don't let on that I told you."

Finn shakes his head, shakes clear the last of the images, the last of the stupidity. "Can't think of how we'd ever bring that one up, Min."

"No,... well. I'm just talkin' it through with you. Bein' honest, like. We've kind of been flirtin', her and me, but I thought it was just banterin', friendly like."

"I'm sure that's all it is," he says, though having seen the way Helena landed her knee in Squinty's balls last night, he's not so sure, and then: "Listen, I hope I've not,... broken anything. Or upset you." He leaves his hand on the rail, wanting her to cover it with hers, which she does, eventually. It reassures him, and that it reassures him reassures her, because she would not fall out with him for long, over anything.

Even if he does not love her in that way.

"'Course not, you ninny."

No, he has not broken it, not broken them. But he has as good as said, he was okay with the idea of her and Helena - one time, maybe two, as a tenderness, a kindness, and a healing, or whatever - and why wouldn't he? They both love her don't they?

Has she really read that right?

Or is that because he can't see further than his nose, can't see how dangerous it is, because what if Helena likes it and wants more than *one time, maybe two*? What if Hermione likes it as well? Or worse, what if she likes it that Helena likes it, with her? Because it's real Finn, you know? It's like me doing it with a guy. How would you feel about that? Kindness or not, you'd not like that at all would you? Least I hope you wouldn't. You'd be jealous as hell. Least I hope you would. So it's real, okay? And one day soon you might wake up and it's goodbye Fin and Min, and Helena doesn't shorten to anything so sweetly quaint for their sunstrip. The best Hermione can come up with is: Helena Handcart.

Oh, God, stop!

But she cannot stop, nor can she hide from herself the fact that she's curious, that she might even want it for the danger in it, and the ruin, because something in her has this affinity for self destruction. And there's Finn, thinking it's nothing, that maybe come the other side of

autumn, they'll fix Helena up with a more permanent solution, like you could just order the perfect guy off Ebay, then Finn and Min will move in together somewhere more permanent, and live happily ever after.

Oh, Minnie,...

Trust me, she'd once told him, trust me and I'll see to it nothing bad happens. She would see to it everything worked out, for all of them. Well maybe she's only proving herself to be unworthy of anyone's trust, because the way she sees things now there's no way through any of this, at least not for all of them. Love is complicated, yes, but also very simple: it's one plus one equals two, and the rest get hurt.

What it most definitely does *not* equal is three.

Chapter Seventy Five

It troubled Squinty that Nina's passport was a problem so easily solved by herself. He had thought it might be something only in his power to restore, and in the promise of restoring it thereby hold some sort of power over her, through her need of it. How he might wield that power was another matter, and it may have been more productive to make her a gift of it and trust in her gratitude - though trust was not a word that came easily to him, and was certainly not a thing to be relied upon when it came to business.

But now it seemed he had no power over her at all. If the passport was so easily replaced, it was worthless. He tried to come up with reasons why there might still be difficulties for her, began to practice arguments in his head along those lines but nothing sounded even vaguely plausible, and he knew the limits of his persuasive ability; when he was on shaky ground he tended only to shout, and that would not work with Nina.

Then there was Fancy Pants Finucane turning up on his doorstep like that and spoiling his day, infuriatingly unruffled by Squinty's retaliatory needling. The incident had left him with a feeling he lacked control over events, and this always unsettled him, darkened his mood. It was for this reason, he now began to view the transformation in his fortunes as less than auspicious.

That Nina could leave at any time worried him less now than the fact she stayed of her own accord. I mean, what was she after? She'd cleaned up his house, cleaned up his dog. Cleaned him up too with his boiled overalls, smelling fresh as a daisy all the time now, but he felt again this sense of losing control of a massively complicated thing, a thing he did not understand.

What did he have that she wanted?

Well, easy, Squinty, you've got money of course.

You're her meal-ticket.

And what did she have for him in return other than that peachy arse and those nice pointy tits? A juicy cunt, perhaps? Sure, but he was a long way from finding out about that. Indeed, he'd been unusually shy in that department because she flummoxed him and he did not know how best to proceed, did not know how to handle her at all. Yes, he

liked his clean house and his clean clothes, and he did not want her to leave him. But he could not take the risk that his money was so strong a lure, she would not be repelled by his advances.

It was all Hermione's fault, her treatment of him with that can of body spray a salutary lesson, denting all confidence in his former seductive prowess.

Bitch.

A car had turned up with squeaky brakes - a newcomer to the town who did not yet know Squinty well enough to laugh at his claims to being anything but the lowest sort of mechanic. He had it on the ramps and was about to smear the pads and shoes with grease, but felt the hairs rise on his neck of a sudden and turned to see Nina watching him.

"Will not stop very well with grease on brakes, John," she observed.

"What?"

"Is old trick. Uncle runs garage business. I watch him do same once."

"So?"

"So what is proper thing to do for noisy brakes?"

"Eh? Oh,.. I dunno, clean 'em all down I suppose. Degrease, blow the dust out with an airline. Maybe one of them cylinders is sticking too. Replace that. Bleed the system. That's the proper way, but it'll take ages. And it's only a bit of grease, like. Trick is not to put too much on. "

"You charge him same if you do good or bad job, so what is difference?"

Squinty growled. Who did she think she was, bossing him around ? That was it with her. She'd made herself so useful, he felt he couldn't manage without her, which meant he had to be more lenient about her lip than he would have been ordinarily.

"You still there?" he grumbled.

"You want me go, I go."

"Eh?"

"You want me go, John?"

He looked at her, steady - she was meaning more than just leaving him to get on with the job. This was a continuation of their chat over breakfast, a kind of threat. Did he want her to stay? Here? With him? She was a pretty one all right, and she smelled nice - an amount of haughtiness about the curl of her lip too that thrilled him. But he was beginning to doubt his feelings when she was around, like he was softening, like he was at risk of doing something stupid, and where women were concerned it was better to keep things simple. Keep em sweet and take what you want when you wanted it. That was the ultimate measure of success with women.

"John?"

"Eh,... no. I don't want you to go, lass."

"And you will do no more smuggling?"

"Told you din't I?"

"But you are old rogue, and I should not believe you." She smiled, teasing him a little.

Squinty cracked a grin. "Less of the old if you don't mind."

"Hmm. So how old are you?"

"Old enough to spank you're arse for being a nosey bugger."

Maybe she liked it a bit rough?

Nina frowned. "Lay hand on me John Mulligan, and I call cops."

"Yea right, then you get arrested and deported."

"I told you, I go embassy, get new passport, then I am all legal and above board."

"And you're going to tell them how you lost it? They'll want names, dates, places. Listen, love, you don't go grassing up people like them

you were with. They're not like normal folk." As he said this, Squinty was impressed by how plausible it sounded of a sudden - and plausible or not, it seemed to be having an effect on Nina, casting doubt.

"So I make up story. I have bag stolen." But she didn't sound so convinced any more.

"And what if they don't believe you? Look, I told you I'd get it back for you. No fuss, no bother. Okay? But we got to do it gentle, like."

"No John. This is dangerous game. We are both in deep shit. Only you do not realise. Need plan save both our skins."

"Eh, don't be daft lass. I said I'd look after you."

There was definitely something in those eyes he thought, and that mouth, held normally so severe but at times straining at the seams to reveal a playfulness. He imagined she could be really dirty in bed. And then he wondered, was he too old for her? Would she even think of him as a possibility? But why should he be worrying about stuff like that when she so clearly owed him. It was just a question of timing.

"You would like cup of tea, John?"

"Aye, go on."

Then, thinking back on her conversation with Finn, she said: "You will not hurt me, will you? I mean, seriously. For sure?"

"What? How do mean, like? Hurt you? Course not. Told you, door's open lass. No one's keeping you here."

"You forget."

"Forget? What's that then?"

"I am not really housekeeper for you. I am given by these men. If I go away, they will want to know where. And if you cannot tell them, they will ask you to repay them. I do not know what stupidity made you ask them for housekeeper. Why not advertise like normal man?"

"I dunno love. I wasn't thinkin' straight. Got into a bit of a misunderstanding,... well,... with her up the cafe. You know? Thought

I'd make her jealous, like."

What?

Both Squinty and Nina were surprised by this sudden admission.

"Young one or older one?"

"What? Older one,... Hermione,.. not the kid! What do you take me for?"

Hermione? Finn's Hermione?

"Misunderstanding, John?"

Oh well, Squinty,... in for a penny: "She,.. led me on a bit, you know? I thought she was up for it - been flirtin with me for ages like. So I decide to do somethin' about it and she knocks me back, treats me like some sort of pervert or something. Stuck up cow, she is."

Nina suppressed a smile, wondered exactly what it was he'd done, but did not press him on it.

"It were stupid, I know."

"This is reason for bad blood between you and Mr Finn? You abuse his girlfriend?"

"What? Nah. I've been nowhere near that Russian bint, - all airs and graces and mouth like a fuckin sewer, that one. Wouldn't touch her with a barge pole. It's Hermione, up the Sea View I'm talkin' about."

"Oh? Mr Finn has two lovers? But he seems so ordinary."

"Eh?"

"Hermione at the cafe is his girlfriend, John. You did not know this? You have lived here how long? And I find this out in five minutes. You need gentle approach with people, John, or they shut you out and you learn nothing."

Squinty was momentarily confused, then angry.

Fancy Pants Finucane, and Hermione?

Bastard!

Then he remembered it didn't matter because it was Nina he was now within half a chance of dipping his wick into, if he could only play things right. And even if he couldn't play them right, he'd be taking her anyway because,... well,... she *owed* him and there was a limit to his patience.

She frowned. "You still have feelings for this woman?"

Sure he does, she thought, and by the way his eyes fastened on her behind as she jogged by of a morning, it was plain to see what kind of feelings.

"Nah,... it were all a mistake. But,... you know,..."

"What?"

"It's in the past,... and, well,... I'm glad you're here, love, that's all."

He's a letch and a rogue, she thought, and he's as transparent as a child in certain matters, but she had warmed to him, and was also glad to be here, though for reasons more complicated than either of them could surmise. "All of that is very nice, John, and I thank you. But is still bad situation."

"No. It only seems bad because you're thinkin' too far ahead, thinking: what if this, what if that? Half the stuff we're afraid of doesn't exist, right? Only we make it true, in our heads. See?"

"Like ostrich."

"Eh?"

"Ostrich. You know? Bird puts head under sand when danger comes, not thinking big bottom is in plain sight for kicking. Or like Lord Nelson, put telescope to blind eye and see no ships."

But neither history nor metaphor were Squinty's forte. "You're losing me, love."

"Cannot hide from truth, John. We need plan. Save both our skins."

It would be easier if they had friends, she thought, but the only person who came close to a friend in Carrickbar was Finn, and Finn clearly hated Squinty's guts. Indeed, just about everyone in Carrickbar disliked him, if Finn was to be believed. If that didn't tell her something, what would? That Squinty wasn't worth the trouble, that he would, in spite of all his assurances, hurt her,... maybe not deliberately, but more by his stupidity.

It would be simpler, like Finn said, just to run, but she couldn't do it. Fear was only one kind of prison.

Love was another.

Chapter Seventy Six

Carina did not sleep with Finn that night because, throughout everything, and above all else, including her love for him, he was still her most promising project, and she would not spoil that for anything.

She had encountered many men in his situation, in the therapeutic setting, burned out by unnecessarily stressful, modern, bullshit jobs, bullshit marriages and bullshit lives, offspring grown big like cuckoos displacing all sense of reason, and she had been able to save none of them - not properly, only find some way of reconciling their angst with what was slowly killing them. And such a shaky cure as that usually came in a blister pack.

It was nobody's fault, this thing - useless to search for blame or even a name for it. It's just that the world had lately grown old and fat, and very, very sick. It was like all the demons of the underworld at once were pouring out of the cracks and taking up residence, rendering the real world, the outer world as capricious, as unstable as the inner. Well, that was fine for the immortals. That was just how they liked it - the only way they could get their kicks, probably. But for those afraid of annihilation, physically and mentally, these were terrifying times.

Her job had become one of slotting people back into lives they were ill suited for, lives they had fallen out of in despair, not on account of any particular weakness on their part, but because their lives had become impossible. It had puzzled her in the early days as a counsellor, how patients were so often resistant to the cure, as if they identified with the malady and did not want to let go of it. But she had come to the conclusion they did not want to be cured of the fear of a thing that might yet kill them, and there was nothing crazy about that. Indeed, it made perfect sense.

So it was no surprise medication had become a key part of the cure. Medication made it so people did not mind their impossible lives, and therefore assumed they were cured, when they were not. But they were not so sick as they thought, these poor, sad people, these lost souls railing against the madness of the world, running from it, cowering from it. Indeed they were the only ones with eyes to see.

Sometimes of course the medication made things worse - amplified anxieties into a profound despair, robbed the sufferers of sleep and all sense of their selves. These were the more difficult cases. Side effects were taken care of by other pills, and by more counselling

appointments, though in increasingly smaller slices as budgets were shaved, which left, basically, the medication, largely unsupervised. The poor were expendable, and certainly dying in greater numbers the world over these days. Only the rich could afford to be saved now, but she did not envy them the world they were inheriting - not that it mattered, so long as there remained sufficient numbers of rich loonies around to pay her wages and put petrol in her little Porsche.

She had come to know at a glance those cases where survival was unlikely - no matter what she tried. It was a kind of grim sixth sense. She still took it as a failure on her part, to lose someone, but did not judge them. Ultimately we were all responsible for our own fate, and she was sympathetic to the view suicide was hardly a sin, more a last attempt at regaining control of a life tormented by grotesque and alien forces that had no business being in the world.

As for her career, whatever the reason for losing a patient, it was a tick in the wrong box, at least in so far as such things were measured these days. And only so many ticks in that box were permissible. There was an epidemic of madness sweeping the world, and the response was to attack those struggling to understand it, cut their numbers, merge the mental health units, increase efficiency by managerial intervention, and less compassion.

Efficiency. Efficiency. Efficiency.

So, with Finn she had taken the opportunity of saving his life before it was too late, by taking the patient, who was not her patient, out of his life altogether, by convincing him of the absolute necessity of it, and the insanity of clinging to a life that was killing him. He might still have been at home now, wife, kids, spreadsheets, all of it rendered manageable by Cetilopram, then sleeping pills, then heart pills. The price would have been both emotional and likely sexual impotence by the time he was fifty, lovelessness, a feeling of uselessness, of existential nothingness.

Or he could still be himself.

And free.

It would not have worked with everyone, this cure, but she'd judged correctly Finn possessed just the right amount of desperation and trust,...

In her.

Those meetings,... the cramped, airless rooms, the suits,... the robotic posturing, the preening, and Finn his hairline beaded with sweat, his pale complexion, his hasty, nervy gestures,... the supercilious smirks from the others at his expense,...

Because they thought he was losing it.

And they were enjoying it!

They were seeking union in their distancing of themselves from all trace of mental illness, as if they were themselves immune, and perfect.

It was the pen she recalled - this their fateful connection. He'd no doubt forgotten that little incident, but there'd been a time when the pen he was twiddling with as he'd presented his jerky Powerpoint, had slithered from moist fingers, bounced from the table top, launched itself on the clicker, in a perfect parabola. And she had reached up calmly to capture it, and with a serene smile, handed it back. He'd seemed calmer after that, and she'd noticed his glances, seeking her out, fastening onto her stillness like a drowning man.

She could help this one, she thought.

But she needed to be radical.

It was a grave responsibility, sending him out into a world she suspected he was ill equipped for, and perhaps too old to adjust to properly - him and her both. It was retreat they each needed, then, to make sense of the world from a distance, not in the thick of it. She could easily have spared them both by taking him as a lover, taking him away from the world. He was clearly vulnerable, but she was mature enough to handle it, for both of them.

And she was seriously considering it.

He was not a man who would occupy much room in her life - plenty of room still for herself, for her work, for her central obsession, the workings of the mind - his mind, her mind, everybody's fucking mind and why they were breaking down at an ever increasing rate.

Finn also thought she was special, and she could not help but be

flattered by that, and we were after all at times the most willing victims of both our vanity and our fantasies. He was not unintelligent, not boring to be with. His only vice was his passive nature, therefore the ease with which he could be manipulated by others, and - by virtue of his significant anima complex - by women in particular,...

Including her,...

Which was another reason not to make things any worse for him than they already were.

Yet here she was.

She'd not expected him to take up with a woman so soon, let alone two of them - though in what sense he had taken up with them both was as yet unclear to her. Possibly also to Finn. Perhaps she was not alone in finding something about Finn Finucane that was irresistible, in a sad sort of way - like a lost, sweet natured puppy you could not help taking home with you. Undemanding, harmless, lovable, good company.

Poor Finn.

She'd imagined him fiddling quietly with his watches, taking lonely, contemplative strolls along the beach while the stress of decades seeped out of him - *something achingly romantic in that, eh Carina!* And then one day, maybe,... she'd surprise him. She'd be the girl splashing her toes in the sea, hair tossed by the breeze, him wandering towards her, oblivious at first, hunched, morose in his loneliness, then looking up in final recognition of something vital.

Carina?

Well,... best laid plans and all that.

So, here we are now, late April, indeed the eve of May. She runs the Porsche up onto the harbour front, and steps out. She had not expected it to be warm, nor so beautiful as this. Finn had always described Carrickbar as cold and bleak and rather crumbling in appearance, and the sea as grey, not blue - more reflective of his own mental state perhaps.

There's a family down on the beach playing cricket, a nostalgic innocence to their presence, the children, a boy and a girl in cute, matching cardigans - reminders of a past now at odds with the present,

and an enemy to the future. The tide goes out a long way here, and the sands are clean, wholesome. The girl reminds her of herself as a child - willowy, fast on her legs, easy to laugh. Something catches in her throat and she turns away.

A good-looking guy comes up the steps by the sea-wall, young, lean, muscular. He's wearing a hi-vis jacket, carrying a sack of rubbish, all things he's collected from the tide-line. She tries him for a smile - direct eye contact - oh if she were but ten years younger! (Try twenty, Carina) The smile is returned. No reluctance there, she notes. Symbolically at least, Carrickbar welcomes her, though she's certain, in spite of his invitation, Finn will be flabbergasted.

She's not told him she's coming, indeed left him at their last meeting very much with the impression she would not be.

Naked!

Poor Finn.

Why had she done that?

"Anywhere I can get a decent cup of coffee round here?" she asks

The young guy lowers his sack, beams - such a winning glow about him. He points up the promenade, recommends the Sea View.

"Ah, the Sea View! Of course. Thanks."

Carina grabs her bag, locks the car, lowers her shades, makes way. Yes, she's checking on him, checking on her project. But that doesn't simply mean knocking on his door and shouting "SURPRISE!" He talks a lot about the Sea View. And she's curious about that. Curious too, of course, about Hermione Watts.

Finn's new lover.

Chapter Seventy Seven

Hermione sees the car, sees the woman, watches her exchange words with Kyle - all of this at a distance while she wipes the tables down. She doesn't know why she's interested, other than it's a woman alone, well dressed in a cream trouser suit and flats - a bit out of place, like Finn once, all that time ago. Sure,... another story by the looks of it - long, reddish coloured hair, big shades, nice bag. She's either asked the way to the bank and the cash machine, in which case she'll be disappointed, or it's something cold to drink she's wanting. But Kyle would have known about the cash machine, so it's definitely the Sea View she's after.

Hermione is spooked by the way she moves - slow, self assured, a confident roll of the hips that Hermione has often tried but finds requires more work and a rhythmic coordination than she has the patience for.

Some women just have it, don't they?

The door jingles. In she comes. Scent? Yes, scent. Something warm, secretive.

Secretive?

Whatever does that smell like, Minny?

Hermione takes a breath, smiles. "So,... what can I get you?"

"Americano please, black, no sugar."

Coffee? She wants coffee? For sure Hermione had thought it would be Lemonade. And ice. "Coming right up." She bangs the scoop, makes steam. Either the woman's eyes are drawn to her tits or she's reading her name badge.

What's that about?

Likes her coffee same way as Finn - notice that?

Yes, yes, I noticed!

Likes to know the names of people,...

Hmm?

The woman takes a seat, window seat, Finn's seat, raises her shades a moment, rests them atop her head while she looks out - startling green eyes, freaky calm, like an android, or something spiritual. Not young - fortyish, like Helena, the kind of 'not young' that still looks good in snug denim. The shades are lowered and she settles in like warm water, inwardly and outwardly still. Hermione has never seen anyone like her before - finds herself a little shocked, a little in awe.

You're not going all mad Dyke are you, Minnie?

Shut up, who asked you?

She approaches with coffee, little biscuit on the side. The woman looks up, smiles, then hits her with it:

"Hermione."

It's not a question - more an opening, punched clean through the wall of polite pretence. She's saying: *I know who you are.*

Hermione stops, catches her breath, runs the connections, jiggles the wires of this inexplicable thing, jumps for a conclusion - the only one that makes any sense:

Fuck! "Kathleen?"

The woman gestures with an upturned palm, an invitation to sit. Hermione sits, meek, submissive on her own ground, knees shaking, bristling within, breathing deep to calm the tremor.

Bitch!

"No," again the smile, something genuinely warm in it, disarming. "I'm Carina. We talked once, on the 'phone. Remember?"

Carina? The shrink woman? Finn's Carina? Oh,... shit, that's much worse!

Hermione sighs. Looks up with resignation as if at the grim reaper. "I knew you'd come," she says.

"Oh?"

"Just answer me one thing, darlin', then I know where we stand. Okay?"

Carina warms to the word *darlin'*, makes friends with it. If this woman has needs, she is mostly in control of them. State your position. No bullshit. Out with it: "All right."

"Have you come to take him away from me?"

Carina feels the full force of that one, feels it in her heart - a stab of sweetness, desperation and a fear too. Hermione impresses her - the energy, the clean, precise persona, the pale make-up, but most of all the warmth, the sincerity.

Yes, she's wondered about it, wondered about bowling into Finn's life here and upsetting things all over again, perhaps then picking him out of the mud, wiping him down and tucking him back into her pocket for safe keeping. For sure she'd thought these Carrickbar women could not be that interested in him - only in making *use* of him. But she sees now this is not the case. She doesn't know what the case is exactly, only it's not what she was thinking. Had she felt it was going to be easy, she would have done it anyway, spared him a banal fate on the edge of nowhere at the beck and call of dull women. But this isn't nowhere exactly, and neither Hermione nor Helena are dull. It's the people who make the place a place worth being, and on that score, Carrickbar is definitely somewhere.

Sure, there's more going on here. She sees it, feels it, settles in for the long game. Hermione is quite something. She shakes her head, lifts the shades again, shows the eyes, practiced in therapeutic sympathy, in sincerity - calculated, yes, but not exactly deceptive.

"It's not like that between me and Finn," she says.

Hermione relaxes, tries a ripple of a smile, flattened somewhat by the fact she is not convinced, that she's still afraid. And intimidated.

By Carina.

Two PhDs, and a shrink, and a raft of academic textbooks to her name to say nothing of being objectively stunning to look at. But Hermione's not so dumb she doesn't realise Carina did not answer the question. It's not like that between you *now*, Carina. *But what about wanting it?*

Like you wanting Helena, Minnie?

Oh, trust you to bring that one up.

And I don't want Helena in that way.

No? How then, exactly?

All right, I'm just curious, it's one of those secret female fantasies, all right?

But hoping to survive it.

Hermione takes a breath, steadies herself, makes ready to reply, but Carina beats her to it with a slice of disorientating honesty. "Not sure how it is exactly between me and Finn, Hermione - only not like *that*."

Hermione thinks on this one, comes up blank, still feels threatened, swallows it down. Helena was right, there's something about Carina that suggests a moving on from the banal nature of sex, that sex would be boring to her. But no one's actually like that in practice are they? Given the opportunity, we're all up for it. It's only lack of opportunity, or lack of courage that denies us. But how does a woman like Carina, as good looking as that, get taken seriously by men? For sure all any of them can be thinking when they sit down with her is what she's like undressed.

"Finn,... didn't tell me you were coming."

"He doesn't know."

"Oh?"

"It was a spontaneous thing. My coming."

"Long way for spontaneous, Carina."

"Yes, the last hundred miles especially. I'm absolutely shattered."

"Well, that's Carrickbar for you. Long way from anywhere."

"Thought the sea air would do me good."

Ah,... Carina has found the right note - hinted at a vulnerability, and this intrigues Hermione, finds it irresistible. It's how Carina works, again, not exactly deceptive, but effective.

"And it will," she says. "Finn told me there was some trouble,... with your job. I was thinkin' to ask him, you know? 'bout seein' if you fancied coming up for a bit. Change of scene, like,..."

You were?

Course I was!

No fuckin' way.

"But,.. well,... full on job like yours,... I mean,... it's gettin' time, I suppose."

"Time's not really a problem for me right now, Hermione. It was,... kind of you,... to think about it."

"No bother. So,... where you stayin'?"

"Haven't booked anywhere. What's that place like across the road?"

"King James? Oh,.. that's not been a hotel for ages - and I wouldn't recommend it if it was." Hermione thinks - *no way is Carina sleeping round at Finn's. So,...*

"Why not stay here?"

"Here?"

"My place, upstairs. I'm round Finn's most nights anyways,..." Let her think on that one! Except why would Carina care? Carina already knows she and Finn are lovers.

"Hermione,... that's kind of you. But,..."

"But?"

"I've just washed up here like a piece of driftwood - plus I know you're worried about me and Finn. I,... I could be your worst nightmare, and you invite me to stay at your place?"

"I'm not worried about you, Carina. Listen, Finn trusted you enough to leap out of his train wreck of a life. Only reason he came to Carrickbar in the first place was 'cos of you, right?"

"Well, that's true. But,... what if you're wrong about me?"

What does she mean by that? Peculiar thing to say!

"Doesn't matter. I'm trustin' you. Trustin' you 'cos Finn trusts you. And if I'm wrong in any of that, it's not my fault, is it?"

It's yours. And Finn's.

And not much I can do about any of it anyway.

Hermione smiles, slides her 'phone from her apron pocket. "Shall we ring and let him know you're here then?"

I want to see his face, she's thinking, *see his face when he sees Carina, because that ought to tell something of the truth about these two*.

Except,... she doesn't really care - well, no - she does care. She cares a lot, and she's curious of course, but there's something about Carina that makes her want to hug the woman, or kiss her hands, or something equally strange, and she understands Carina's attachment to Finn, because she shares it. Oh,... what is it with people and their exclusivity over who they allow to deliver that fleeting moment of sweet delirium? She would gladly share it, share him, share what he does for her with Carina, with Helena even,...

What?

Well why not?

Yes,.. yes, I know. It's the taking away that hurts. The fear she may lose him. And she doesn't mean it, not literally anyway.

Whatever literally means.

Carina smiles - serene, easy,... "He'll have a fit," she says. "He'll think I'm checking up on him."

"And are you?"

"Not really. He seems to have found his feet. Anyway, checking up is what wives do, which is Kathleen's department, and she's not been bothered about Finn for a long time."

Ah, yes, *Kathleen*. On that subject they are clear allies. Smart move Carina to seek this common and highly emotive ground. They could talk for ever, digging up the secrets of Finn's life, with Kathleen. Hermione asks: "What happened there? Can you tell me?"

"Nothing more than I'm sure Finn's already told you."

"Finn's not told me anythin'."

"Well, things change. People change. Finn reacted to the stress of his life by going into his shell. Kathleen did the opposite. She let it change her, energise her, make her bigger than she was. Finn was a big-ish man once. But in the end it didn't suit his nature, and now he just wants to be small."

"Sounds 'bout right. He needs coaxin' out gentle like."

Ah,... feel that, Carina? Feel that glow of compassion, of connection for the same man?

"Exactly. But like all of us, the occasional life-changing cataclysm does no harm."

Hermione regards her closely, still unable to read anything much, wonders if Carina is herself a cataclysm come to shake up all their lives."It's goin' to be fun having you around."

"Oh,... I'm not really a fun sort of girl, Hermione. Quiet life, books, sunsets, that's me."

Hermione thinks on this.

Yea, I'll bet.

Chapter Seventy Eight

Squinty might simply have asked Nina that night, smiled his smile, opened his arms. And she would have wiped her hands on the dishcloth, left off the washing up and settled into his embrace. She might have been persuaded then, by the earnest feel of him, to let him in, to invite him deep down inside of her. Then she might have begun the saving of him. She might have taught him too a gentler kind of lovemaking, the kind that comes with tenderness and a smile, and a sense of nurturing something in the other - rather than the kind that necessitates grimaces of hunger and robbery.

Instead, he watched her working at the sink, watched her peachy bottom while wondering how to best get himself most firmly up it. He allowed himself the pleasure of contemplating it a while, to the point of a certain stirring in his trousers. Then he took himself out to the workshop, to a copy of a magazine he kept sequestered there, one that depicted women trussed up, ready for a good shagging, and there he indulged himself with a vigorous wank. And later, when the call came offering him another job for the going rate, plus Nina's papers, he said yes. He wasn't so bothered about the money, but the unexpected mention of that passport tipped the balance, because he had concluded, after much deliberation that if she knew he had it, surely she'd be willing to do anything for him.

Anything!

The only bit of this that made any sense was Squinty's will to power, thinking it was the obvious way to get what he wanted from Nina. He could not see Nina had already melted in her sympathy for him, that all he had to do was ask. And yes, she might even have allowed him *that*, if only he had been able to ask for it nicely.

This time the job would be different, the caller said. There would be no car waiting with a flat tyre. He was to land the goods, hide them, keep them safe for a while, wait further instruction, that's all. It sounded easy enough, and Squinty was relieved because squeezing cannabis resin into that spare tyre had always been a pain in the arse. Maybe they were still testing him, that this time it would something more valuable, something other than drugs, but beyond rough size and weight he didn't ask, didn't care. It was just a bit of smugglin', and everyone with a boat round here did it. What he did ask about was the passport, like when would he be getting it? He was told that as a gesture of good will, it was already in the post.

Squinty didn't believe this for a minute, but the possibility of its closeness inspired him to boldness. Or was it fear? The thing was on its way, so how could he refuse the work? He was slow to realise of course he could not refuse. The passport was both his reward and the lowering of the ladder a little deeper into shit.

He set out early next morning. Nina heard him banging around, getting ready. She rose quickly, wrapped herself in a dressing gown and came downstairs to see if she could make him breakfast. He growled at her, told her to go back to bed. She was hurt by so fierce a rebuff after they had talked so amicably before. She saw through him of course, knew at once what he was up to,...

"John?"

"Just a bit of fishin' like," he said, thinking to placate her. He was sorry for his prickliness, sorry for the stung look in her eyes, but was unable to say so.

"You sure is all you do?"

He would not be nagged. Nagging brought out the worst him. "Will yer gerroff me back woman. I told you, it's just a bit of fishin'. Fuck-in-ell!"

She watched him go, felt the door slam, then dressed quickly, went down to the harbour, and without his knowing, watched him sail out. The boat looked hopelessly small and fragile, and she feared for him, but felt also empty and foolish, and angry - angry because it looked like Finn was right, that Squinty would hurt her. He already had. Returning home, she sat and considered her options. Yes, it was best she left him, but Squinty was also right - there'd be questions over how and where she'd lost her passport. She would not tell a soul the truth about that. You did not inform on people like these. They were the cockroaches of the world, inhabitors of all the shady cracks, came out at night, and would survive any calamity. Even from prison they would reach out and get you, have you tortured, murdered, buried in a shallow grave - even the slightest thing they would interpret as disrespect. The only safety was in not entering their world in the first place, or finding a way to leave it ghost like, and without a trace.

She took the money from her hiding place, also the phone she'd bought on her last outing, and the pay as you go sim-card with the ten pound top up certificate. There was no one she could call. No friends,

no powerful protectors. There was only her mother, and she had not come all this way to be asking her for help. She packed a bag, clothes for a few days, and was ready to set out but instead sat down and thought about it all some more. It was not without regret. She'd worked hard here, cleaned it up, had it all on the verge of respectability - Squinty's run down garage, a place on the edge of oblivion, yet looking now as if it might be revived. More than one person had called for petrol now, and there had been other calls about repair work - and Squinty was not without ability. He really knew what he was doing, but was keener to shirk than to work and when he worked he took a peculiar pleasure in doing a half assed job than a proper one.

She wondered when the rot had set in with him. Sure, he was not beyond redemption, but some people did not want saving. It would not be the first time she had misjudged a man. Perhaps she had misjudged Finn too, wondered if, when she turned up on his doorstep asking for help, he'd be embarrassed, pretend he did not recognise her and shut the door in her face. Or perhaps he could be coerced, if she threatened to tell Hermione he and she had,... what? That time in the dunes,... a quick, *you know*.

Since when did you become so dirty and manipulative, Nina?

Is it living with Squinty Mulligan?

No, she would not do that. She would not cross over to the dark side!

While she was thinking about all of this, the mail arrived and she opened it, opened it out of a combination of spite, and thinking she might find something of value she could take from him, some vital piece of information, something that would get him into trouble, something important, like the dignity he had taken from her.

Wait a minute. What's this?

There it was, in the very first envelope: her passport, and her agricultural worker's certificate.

What the,...?

She sat for a moment, stunned, disbelieving. At first she was ready to forgive, wondered what miracle he had worked in order to recover it. Then she was cursing him anew, but tenderly this time for his stubborn courage, as much as his stupidity. And finally, she wondered instead if

he'd meant to tell her about it at all, or merely keep the documents, and in keeping them keep also a quiet control over her, as his friends had done. It took a good half hour for her to realise she was fully restored to herself and free. She had once more her dignity, her proof of legality. She owed nothing to anyone. She would order a taxi then, and go. Or would she stay? Say nothing about the passport, do nothing other than keep it safe, give John a chance to tell her of his plan? Or by his silence hang himself?

Then Billy the dog came to look at her with mournful eyes, his rope lead trailing from between massive, salivating jaws - an unsubtle enquiry about a walk along the beach.

"Oh, fuck off Billy."

But Billy needed her. And that the mutt needed her, moved her. And was that not what she had left home for in the first place, to find somewhere she was needed?

Chapter Seventy Nine

Helena turns slowly, an eyebrow arched in query, her brow furrowed, unable to believe what she's just heard. "What did you say?"

"I said, kiss me."

She and Hermione are on the carpark of the supermarket at Weston. It's mid-morning, raining, and gulls are screaming over-head. They are snug in the Volvo, the back stacked with the week's shop, the windows steaming to a cosy intimacy.

Hermione had been wondering when best to tell Helena about Carina, had told her in the supermarket, half an hour ago while pushing trolleys - Helena grabbing the things she wanted, all the extravagantly branded items, Hermione rooting deep for the offers.

Helena hadn't taken the news well, had almost dropped a jar of Finest Pickle in surprise. "She's been here for three days, sleeping at your place, and only now you are telling me?"

"Oh, don't get all heated. I just din't know how to break it to you, that's all. I knew you'd go off on one."

"And where is she now? She is with Finn?"

"Round his place, I suppose. Just chattin'."

"You hope is all they do."

"Oh, give over. You think everyone's at it 'cept you. But it's not like that. She's not like that. She's strange, Helena. Maybe it's dealin' with all them unhappy people, I don't know but she's not used to dealin' with normal folk - somethin' other worldly about her, unpredictable, and a bit sad. You were right. She's like a priestess or somethin', and I know she's not come to take him away from us,... I mean,... from me."

Helena is not so sure. "You wish."

"It was you who told me we'd not to worry about her. And I'm not. Really. I like her. She's direct. And I can be direct right back. She makes me feel,... comfortable."

"Time not to worry about Carina was when she was three hundred

miles away. Now she's here. Now we worry. And be careful with your directness, and getting too comfortable with her. This is what she does for a living, remember. This is a woman who can sign papers to have us locked in a secure place as lunatics. This is a woman who decides who is sane and who is not."

"Don't be like that. She's nice. Really."

Helena softens at Hermione's sweetness. Only Hermione can do this - in anyone else Helena despises sweetness. "Very well, I reserve judgement. But only on your say-so. And because I love you, but deep down I am troubled by this development."

They were in the coffee shop by this time, sipping poor, watery coffee, picking their way through dry, crumbling muffins that Helena had insisted on for the appearance of things - ladies at their leisure and all that, except the muffins were a disaster and impossible to eat tidily.

These English! *Want kick up arse*.

She was by turns gazing away into deep contemplation, then ranting, firing off expletives so Hermione had to shush her.

It was a control thing, she decided - this thing with Helena and Finn. Helena sought to control events, control people. Everyone in Helena's life had their place, and a script she'd written for them. It was the way she'd clawed back some space after the trauma of her life, by freezing those around her into roles she had herself carefully crafted for them, roles that left her room to be whomever she wanted to be when among them and thus,... safe.

Hermione had chosen another path, the path of freedom, both for herself and those around her, if only because her past had not led her through such violence, and where such freedoms had not been an option. If she encountered others tied in knots, she untied them, let them go their own way, did not tie them up again of a fashion to suit herself. But if that was true, and she really wanted to wake up from the fantasy of doing it to or with Helena, or *whatever*, then why, just now, had she asked Helena to kiss her?

"Hermione?"

Hermione sinks back into the seat, curiously relaxed since Carina's appearance. It's not at all how she'd thought things would be. Helena

looks fierce though, nostrils flared, like she needs soothing, untying, setting free. Five minutes chatting with Carina would cure her, if she'd only relax into it. Sure, Helena had met Carina before, had written the script for her, rendered her safe, but Carina had torn the script up, walked boldly onstage uninvited, as herself.

"Been thinkin' that's all," said Hermione.

"Oh?"

She ventures the back of her hand to Helena's cheek, settles her finger-tips into the light downy texture of it. Helena does not flinch, locks eyes, curious, a little imperious. But Hermione melts her, sliding her hand into the warmth of the nape of Helena's neck, and a sigh escapes them both.

Helena sniffs, as if to make light of it. "So,.. you want me to kiss you?"

"Yes. Proper kiss though, like you mean it. Kiss that starts with your lips, but sets off somethin' like one of them big colourful fireworks that goes off all starbursty 'tween our legs."

"What? You make fun now?"

"No, I'm not makin' fun. I mean it. Think you can do that?"

"Well,... I,..."

"Listen, I'll always be with you, Helena. Always around, you know? So long as you want me, that is, but the question is, in what way? Been doin' my head in, wondering about it. This way we'll find out if it's possible, that's all. So,... you up for it? I'm callin' your bluff, lady. We bessy mates or what? Or somethin' else, somethin' more 'n that?"

"I ask for help with sexual feeling, one time only. Now you are proposing fuckbuddies?"

"Don't be disgusting."

"Marriage then?"

"It was you first brought up the marriage thing, and I know you weren't serious, but still,... can't be married if we can't,... well,... you know? I mean, no point is there?"

"Okay, so,... I think I know where you go with this. You think if we make love and hit things off, we can what? Make couple? Me and you? Then we leave Finn to Carina, and each to our happy endings? How cosy. Sure, is much simpler story, but not the one I have in mind."

"Dunno what you have in mind, Helena. Can't get my head round that at all. And neither can you, I reckon. So come on, pucker up you shameless tart. Car's all steamy. No one can see us - I mean just in case you're shy about it."

Helena is affronted. Shy? "I tell you before: I want woman, I take woman."

"Well, go on then. I'm waitin'."

Helena leans over. She may lack caution, but she does not lack courage. They meet half way, lured close and held intoxicated now each by the heat and scent of the other. Lips brush, but they hold back at the moist void. There's fear of a sudden, uncertainty, hearts cracking ribs. Hermione's neck flushed red with,.. something.

Helena blinks first, looks away. "Fuck,..."

Hermione steers her back on course, maintains eye contact, determined to get to the bottom of this. "No. Fuck later. Maybe. Got to kiss first."

Has she really got Helena on the run? The thought excites her. Maybe that's it, just frighten her some more with the reality of it and Helena will back down, and everything will return to normal - she and Helena as bessy mates, she and Finn as lovers.

Simple.

Deep breath. They meet at the void again, hover over it lightly, then plunge. Helena's tongue is first across the taboo-line, to be met with a startled, exploratory caress from Hermione's. Hermione likes the feel of Helena's tongue - hot and silken and vital but,.. although the niceness of it wanders a little way into her heart and fills her breast with sweetness, the firework stalls. There's an initial whizz, then a fizz and a pop, and then,... nothing, and she's disappointed by that because,...

She'd really wanted it to go off.

"Oh!"

She draws back, hand upon Helena's chest, fingers spread - not to repel, more to steady, to grant dignified pause while she savours the experience. Maybe, maybe yes. Next time. They need to try again, without the nerves, maybe a little wine, too, but she's not sure Helena's up for that.

Helena pouts. "What? You don't like after all?" But there's a laughter in the corner of her eyes, spreading quickly, warmly. Impossible to resist. She'd felt it too, or rather,... she hadn't felt it either. But there's a hunger too. They both want more.

It was not like kissing a man, she thought. It was like searching for a reflection of herself in the feel of the other, and she could not remember a time when she had ever felt so deeply loving of another,... and yet,..

Hermione folds her head to Helena's breast, sinks deep, and warm, secure, and she sighs. "Course I like, you daft cow."

Helena closes her arms around her, holds tight, shaken by a searing love, then runs her fingers through Hermione's hair, tries to close them over it, tries to catch up little snatches of it, but it's too short and fine and shiny. It slips through them playfully. She is such a delightful tease, this Hermione Watts. "So what is problem?"

"Dunno. Maybe it's like with men."

"Oh?"

"First time it's best just to get it out the way."

Helena's heart is no secret, beating at the strangeness of it, at the challenge, and the experience was beautiful and it would be really something to take it just a little further.

Would Hermione truly be willing?

Just a little further?

"This doesn't feel wrong to me, Helena. Should do though. Woke up this morning all sweaty and naked 'gainst Finn, and that lovely scalding

heat of him. Gorgeous it was. Now here I am,... head tucked into you and listening to your heart go thumpety thump. You all soft and warm and smelling so nice."

Helena takes a deep breath. What now? "You mean is wrong if we deceive Finn," she says. "If we play him for cuckoo?"

"I think you mean cuckhold."

"Whatever. Finn is part of us. We both want him. We talk about him endlessly. I mean, serious now, you do still want him don't you? You are not afraid?"

"Afraid?"

"Of being with someone, after Bastard Bryan. So you let Carina have Finn, and you pick girlfriend instead, because it is less serious for you?"

"All right. Maybe I'm afraid of that yes. But don't think I'm not taking you seriously, Helena. What about you?"

"Me?"

"Do you feel warm when I'm around. Do you fee tingly when you think of me? What I'm asking you Helena is do you love me?"

"I love you Hermione, for sure, *yes."*

The answer was quick, easily given, no resistance, unequivocal, and though Hermione couldn't quite believe it was true, it stunned her.

"See,... Finn's never told me that."

"Oh, this is nothing. Some men can't, even if they do. We must judge by their actions. And Finn loves us both, or he would not be in your bed, and he would not be so polite with my,... my bossy mouth."

Helena drops her hand into Hermione's lap, runs a finger along the seam of her jeans, testing for that spark again. Helena loves her. Sure she's said it before, and even though Hermione does not quite believe her, it's more than she's heard from anyone else in a very long time. She feels a shiver, but it's Helena who feels the loosening, the melting, the quickening.

"Not sure about tongues and things, Helena."

"Excuse? You must translate for me, tongues? And things?"

"You know what I'm talkin' about. *I mean, down there.* But I can touch you, and maybe,... well,... what you asked me to do that time? Yes, I've been thinking about it, like I said I would, and I just want you know I'm up for it. Any time you want. You just say so. All right?"

"How about now?"

"What? No, we can't do it here. Din't mean right now. You're not serious?"

"Hermione, you put your fingers inside my pants you find out pretty quick how serious."

"Not here. Not like a couple of teenagers in the car, in broad daylight. We got to have our dignity, Helena."

"There is Travelodge across road. Is dignified enough for you?"

"But,... what about our frozen stuff?"

Helena has to think for a moment. Frozen stuff? Then she laughs, and Hermione laughs, and after a while they fall silent, thoughtful. Their shopping is unimportant now. Everything that was frozen is thoroughly melted anyway.

The rest is inevitable.

Hermione nods. "All right," she says. She thinks of Finn, with Carina, chatting like old friends, maybe more than that. Maybe in bed, like Helena says. Serve him right, then. And anyway,... he'd already said he didn't mind.

Chapter Eighty

Carina in powder-blue cotton shorts, her own, and a plain white teeshirt she'd borrowed from Finn. She wore also a floppy straw hat which the breeze teased. She was happy, rested, her mind fresh with memories of girlhood and seaside holidays. In the short time she'd been in Carrickbar, she'd tanned her legs, and the sun had brought out threads of gold in her hair. The place was a tonic!

She was facing an intrusive enquiry, possible dismissal, and the ever nagging doubt of the ultimate sanction - being struck off, banned from practice, the ruin of her professional life. She'd had her finger in the dyke against the flood for so long, but now it was coming over the top, a deluge of despair and she was being held responsible for it. She should have been agonising over the injustice, but she was not, indeed her equanimity in the face of it had for a long time seemed inappropriate, but no longer. She had reached therefore, she told herself, a point of departure, the outcome of the enquiry, like the BREXIT question being in many ways irrelevant now. A greater reality had taken shape behind the scenes.

She had transcended the matter by no longer resisting it. Whatever her own demons had been, she had cured herself of them, and though Finn would never know it, he had played an important part in all of that.

By contrast Finn himself was still resisting life, still hesitant to fully embrace it, for to embrace life is to abandon restraint. But these days he looked more buttoned-up than ever, still in a pressed shirt and office pants like a half assed Friday Dress down, lacking in imagination. He looked hot and pale too,... and troubled.

He was,... dammit,... relapsing.

She could see things had moved on since last they'd talked, and not in ways he was wanting or expecting. She could see it, feel its source also in the neutral way he spoke of Hermione and Helena. Secretly, she was pleased by this, pleased they could not please him the way his most perfect lover could please him - that lover being her ego of course - unless it was simply that he had put a protective ring around them, shut her out, and was resisting analysis as well as life.

Don't do that Finn. I'm the only thing between you and the nut-house!

They had rarely been alone for long enough to talk deeply of things -

Hermione always there, sweet, charming, welcoming, disarmingly open and trusting. But she had gone shopping with Helena that morning, setting out with a parting look as if to say 'I know you want to talk to Finn, so here he is'.

Strange.

A strange relationship.

With Finn.

Her Finn.

The morning's rain had blown over to be replaced by a sudden heat and a humidity more reminiscent of late summer, but the breeze rendered it bearable, more-so as they'd climbed out of town towards the campsite. The campsite was mostly green and overgrown with years of neglect, waist high weed all steaming gently in the sun, the sea appearing as a deep blue backdrop, flecked with white. It was a promising spot, and must have been very pretty once, but like everything else it's heydey had probably been the sixties and had been going to ruin ever since.

How did you tackle that?

Why would you even want to?

Finn had felt awkward talking with her alone in the house, so had suggested he showed her around, and she'd agreed, sensing his awkwardness, willing him to lose it and become once again natural with her, to share intimacies, to tell her about Hermione and Helena. Clearly there were additional dimensions to Finn in Carrickbar, and she had yet to gauge the shape of them.

Yes, the campsite looked like being the work of decades, so grown over and neglected, but Finn assured her it would be up and running in a year if all went well. But she detected also the doubt in him, a powerful ping on her radar, like during those Powerpoint presentations at work, a hint of brittleness in his tone and a raising of the volume in compensation for his myriad self-doubts. Finn did not always believe his own words, no matter how sincerely he believed he meant them. His natural language was that which spoke only in terms of what he assumed people wanted to hear. And therein lay the path to many a tenacious neurosis, including his.

Oh, Finn!

"You don't mind my coming do you?" she asked, though she knew he did not mind. It was just her way of getting more quickly to the root of things.

"Of course not. It's wonderful to see you. Wonderful having you here, Carina. You look so much better for a bit of sea air and sunshine."

Solicitous. Caring. He might be on his knees but would always enquire after others.

"Yes, amazing isn't it, the effect of the seaside? The Victorians swore by it. We'd bottle it if we could, or make a pill out of it. But I don't want to be the cause of any trouble between you and Hermione. I mean, there's no trouble is there? Min seemed fine with it. We talked for ages the other day. Mostly about you of course."

But if you'd not wanted to cause trouble. you would not have come, Carina, would you?

"Why would there be trouble?" said Finn.

"Are you really so naive, or are we going to spend all day dancing around the issue?"

"Am I naive? Probably, yes, of course - you know me. Dancing? No, or at least I'm trying not to, not with my two left feet. I'd only look ridiculous. And anyway, what issue?"

"You tell me."

"I'm okay,... really. It's nothing. A little tired, I think."

"So there *is* something. Don't be evasive. I'm a psychiatrist, remember? I do this for a living."

"All right,... I'm thinking,... maybe,... I should go back."

"Back?"

"To Aylesbury."

"You mean,... to get some stuff or something, put the house on the market at last?"

"No, for good. Go back to live. The grass is probably shin high by now. It'll take for ever to get the mower through it."

Carina was not expecting this, was indeed shocked by the depth of his relapse, but could not show it. She said nothing, thinking to draw him out some more, to winkle out the reasons, then they might dissolve them together, one by one. Might he really be thinking of leaving Carrickbar? Leaving behind his grand project? His relationships?... Min!

Poor Min!

Poor Min?

And what did he mean, grass? Was this a metaphor for something else? A sense of his neglected responsibilities growing on him perhaps? But they were fantasies. The only thing he had left to do in Aylesbury was sell the house quick before his kids moved back in, and Finn, like the dutiful, self sacrificing pillock he was would be there for them, nurturing them in their eternal childhood.

Pray God, sell the house Finn!

Which watch is he wearing?

Not the Omega,... he's not serious then,... just thinking out loud.

Okay we can work with this.

"Don't," said Finn. "Don't do that therapist thing where you say nothing. Can you not be a human being for me, Carina, and speak your mind. Be emotional and irrational for me?"

"Has Kathleen been in touch? Is that it? Is her fling with the magnificent Mr What's-His-Face over, and she's told you she wants to try again?"

"No. I've no idea how that's going. And anyway, we've both moved on."

"Have you? You're still married to her."

"That doesn't mean anything."

"And the kids? They're not bullying you are they? Wanting to come back? Emotionally blackmailing you."

Did his kids bully him? In a sense, yes, of course they did.

Always had.

"I've not heard anything from them. It's not that Carina."

"All right. In that case, I don't get it, and if you do go back I'll think you're a wanker."

"Ouch."

"That's not to say it's not the right thing to do, or the wrong thing. It's just what I think. My instinct. Okay? But what's brought this on, Finn?"

"It's just,.. complicated of a sudden."

Ah, now we're getting to it. So go for the kill Carina - be direct! "You mean you and Min?"

"No. Not exactly. Partly,..."

Persistence, girl: "Which part?"

"I,... I don't think I deserve her."

What?

"Interesting response. Bullshit of course. Is this you being a coward, Finn? I'd say it was except I know you, and you're not like that. Min's lovely. If I didn't think she was, I'd be flashing my tits at you, trying to lure you to Ireland, keep you in a little cottage by the sea, keep you all to myself."

He smiled at the memory of their last parting. "Still can't believe you did that."

"Me neither."

"You meant it though, about me coming with you?"

"Of course. Still do. But you mustn't listen. I'm not the best of company, you know? I'm sure we could work out how to get along, share a house, even as lovers - there can't be that much to it can there? But you wouldn't know I was there half the time. Same as me, with you, which might suit us both, I suppose. Or you'd be like my own captive guinea pig. I'd drive you mad, then work out the cure. And that would be cruel. But with Min,... this life,... here,... I can see you being happy. Stimulated."

"Stimulated?"

"Yes, because here there are,... challenges."

"You can say that again."

"Challenges are good, Finn. Even the ones we fear - perhaps those most of all. With me you'd just end up mending little watches in a shed in the back garden, and watching old movies of an evening. There seems a dreadful pragmatism about that don't you think? A sort of late middle aged desperation on both our parts."

Pragmatism? Desperation? Actually it sounded idyllic, to both of them. Neither said so.

"I've not mentioned the challenge of Helena yet," he said. "That's the other part that's got me wondering if I should stay or go back."

"Ah, Helena! Min told me you were going into business together. But I thought all that sounded very positive. I'm sure she's a handful but,..."

"Helena's always going to be Helena, and a handful is hardly the right word, but really, that's not it. Not the business part anyway. That would work, I think. I've got the business knowledge, the financial skills, but very little drive these days. She's got plenty of drive, and would be for ever kicking me up the arse, which would keep things moving, so we'd be fine in that respect, a good team - I mean if that's all there was to it."

"So what is it, Finn? What is it with Helena?"

"You ever had sex with a woman?"

"Em,.. well,... sure, lots of times. Every woman's done that."

"Seriously?"

"No,... I can barely bring myself to do it with a man, so in my case, I'm guessing it's even less likely with a woman. You ever had sex with a man?"

"What? No,... don't distract me."

"Then spit it out."

"Say you had this friend, a close woman friend."

She gave a patient sigh. "Me or you?"

"You. And she told you she was afraid she was going to die, and with some justification, and wanted sex, you know, for comfort, for company,... but didn't want it through another relationship, with a man, but wanted you, her friend, to do it for her, with her,... maybe just once or twice to get her through this thing. As a friend. I mean,... can women have that sort of friendship? I'm pretty sure men can't. It's unthinkable,... but with girls I don't know. Which is why I'm asking you."

Carina followed this one through vary carefully, thought about it for a while, again carefully. Was he serious? Surely he knew how ridiculous that sounded? *Choose your words very carefully now Carina,...*

"Well,... if me and this friend were that way inclined, I suppose,..."

"But you're not,... neither you or your friend are Lesbian, if that's what you mean. At least I don't think you are,... You've both been married, your friend has a male lover, and,.. well seems to enjoy the whole heterosexual thing. Never thought of exploring things any other way,… well, until now. So, is that normal? Or does it sound a bit, you-know, weird?"

"Weird? Given my job and the things people have said to me in the course of it, you should know nothing sounds weird to me, Finn. Unusual, yes. Unlikely, probably. Let's just say it adds a different dimension. What else can you tell me?"

"I read somewhere women can be a bit,... bisexual, at least more bisexual than men,.. so maybe that's it, they're a bit,... you know?"

Carina waited for him to finish the sentence but he dried up, blushed,

either shy, or afraid, or simply out of his depth.

Help him out a bit, Carina - this sounds really interesting.

"Okay,... well, if me and my girlfriend are not at least a little bit inclined that way, it's not going make the earth move. If friends is all we are, I mean even cosy toothbrush sharing sisterly best friends, then Eros isn't in the mix, and that's where the sexual energy comes from, that's what makes the earth move. So, it would be a bit like, well,... masturbation,.. just getting someone else to do it for you. There'd be no erotic connection with the *other*. You know?

"You might ask a close friend to help you out if you were having problems in that department - I mean some women don't know how to touch themselves for best effect. So in that case, a good friend, someone you really trust could help you find the right spot,... that sort of thing. It's possible. Yes. Definitely. But you'd have to be careful. Your friend could just as easily find the idea repulsive and never speak to you again."

"Put it like that it doesn't sound too serious then."

"Or she could find she likes it, and then you're really in trouble. I don't know. Sexuality is a grey area. Look, I'm guessing this is Min we're talking about? Something in her past? I wouldn't worry about it. If she's bi,... I mean she's with you now and seems very struck on you."

"It's Min, yes, but not in the past, more in the future, possibly. With Helena."
"Min and *Helena? Now I'm really confused. How do you know?"*

"Min told me."

Min was two timing Finn with Helena? Had she got that right?

"She wants to break up with you? Go with Helena? How did I miss that one?"

"No, not break up,... just do this thing for her,... because,.. we both love her."

"What am I not getting here?"

Finn sighed, impatient with himself, embarrassed none of this sounded

in any way feasible or even half way decent. "Helena's afraid this op's going to kill her or leave her paralysed or something. And it could. She and Hermione have become really close,... so,..."

"So she wants what? One last good shag? Seems a bit superficial, Finn. To be honest if it was me in her place, sex would be the last thing on my mind. And Helena didn't strike me as the vulnerable type. And she knows it would put a strain on your relationship if you found out."

"I wondered if she thought it was less meaningful or something if they did it as friends. And you're saying sometimes friends can do it, but not seriously. Which makes it okay."

"Sometimes,... but really, oh bless you Finn, darling,... it sounds like there's much more to it to me."

"Such as?"

"Are you sure she doesn't just want Min?"

"I've thought of that. And fair enough, I could understand it - I mean I've been cuckolded before. But if she wanted Min, why go out of her way to bring me and Min together first?"

"Okay, good point. I see your dilemma." She would have to think about this, not about the answer - she already knew the answer - it was more how to put it into words Finn could understand. Okay, well,... here goes: "Triangular relationships are complex, and rare, but they do happen."

"Triangular?"

"Well, there are women who prefer married men as lovers, relying on the presence of a wife to put a brake on things, to stop the relationship from getting too heavy. The man's always looking over his shoulder, you see, afraid of the wife finding out? It adds,... sparkle,... danger,... excitement."

"Like Kathleen and Richard?"

"Possibly, but getting back to Helena, maybe that's what she's thinking. She wants Min, but she wants Min also wanting you not to find out. That way Helena stays in control of the pace, and Min doesn't get too carried away. But that's a bit dark - and I've met Helena and she

doesn't strike me as being that underhand. She'd just come right out with it and tell you."

"Plus I do know about it. Min told me. And Helena knew Min would tell me, because Min told her she would. So, I presume Helena knows I know. All of which makes me feel pretty weird to be honest."

This was really interesting, possibly dangerous, possibly wonderful, but probably not. "Okay,... and Helena's not said anything to you about it, not even hinted at it?"

"No, I've not seen her since Min told me,... so it's all a bit,... awkward, really. She,.. flirts with me, always has, outrageously at times, but that's just a bit of fun between us."

"So, how do you feel about it - I mean apart from weird and awkward?"

"Feel? I'm deeply confused, Carina. I love them,... in different ways,... and actually, I don't mind the idea of them being together like that, but I suppose that's just male fantasy nonsense, and actually I should mind. A lot. Because it means I'm,... well,... jilted. Helena's stolen my girl. Simple as that."

Carina takes a while to absorb this. How terribly polite of him, not to mind! How typical of him too. "Oh, Finn,... *darling*,... you're right, this is exquisitely weird."

"There's no need to sound so thrilled by it. Can you take your professional hat off for a moment and tell me what you think?"

"No, I'm the therapist. You tell me what you think first."

"I thought I had."

"Then tell me more."

"Okay, so I'm thinking that maybe if they're thinking along those lines, then maybe they'd be better off together, and me out of the way,... and sort of moving on from here, back to Aylesbury. Maybe this isn't the story of me and Min Lionel's writing after all, but the story of Min and Helena."

"Lionel?"

"Oh,... he's this guy,... but never mind. Unhelpful tangent."

"Okay,..."

"You don't think I should go back?"

"No, and neither do you. It would be a pity, Finn, just as things are getting interesting."

"Interesting for you, you mean. Please be serious. I'm up to my neck in something I really don't understand."

"Okay, let's suppose you leave them to their story, but what about yours, Finn? Don't go back to Aylesbury. That's stupid. Listen, it's not certain I'll be going to Ireland. Not yet. But if I do, you know you're welcome. I've,... I've applied for an Irish Passport. You should do it too. It'll mean we can both still escape this madness if we want to - live, work, in Ireland, or anywhere in Europe post BREXIT. You can stay with me while you think about it, or just stay with me, but whatever happens, don't go back to Aylesbury all right? We've both come too far to see it end like this."

"Okay. You know, the funny thing,... when Min told me - I think she was hoping I'd explode, become all possessive, then she'd decide not to do it - like she was expecting me to make things simpler for her."

"So why didn't you?"

"It was just this loving them both that held me back,... that I want them both to be safe and happy, and if that's together then so be it, even though I've no idea where I fit in any more. I was at the hospital with Helena when she was ill, you know? I was terrified I'd lose her, and I know Min was too. It's like she was blood kin or something even closer than that. But maybe Min's thinking I don't care about *her* enough. I was just,... trying to care,... about both of them. And more,..."

"More?"

"I don't ever want to be in a situation where I feel I possess them, that I have a right to ownership, to trust, to love. Wanting's one thing, owning is quite another, and if the people you want don't want you,... you've got nothing."

"Ah,... nice one, Finn. I'll write that one down later. Lionel has a nice

way with words."

"Unless,..."

"What?"

"Unless it means I don't love either of them,... at all. Or enough. Or in the way I think I do. But whatever this is, all I can see happening is losing them both."

"Well, to be honest me too, so I'd apply for that passport anyway, while praying you never have to use it. Remember there are at least three people who love you, Finn. And I'm one of them. Have you ever told them?"

"Told them what, that you love me?"

"No,... I suspect they already know that. I mean that *you* love *them*."

"I,... don't know,... yes,... no,... maybe not. I'm,... to be honest,... afraid of that word."

"Of the commitment it implies?"

"Yes."

"You either love them or you don't. Look, there's another potential dynamic here, and - be warned- knowing you the way I do, it's going to blow your hat off."

"Okay, sounds like I'm not going to like it much. So,.. go on."

"Either consciously or unconsciously, Helena's steering things towards a polyamorous threesome."

"Poly,... as in many,... amory as in?... em,... does that mean what I think it means?"

"I'd suggest you look it up online but it'll link to nothing but porn and juvenile chatrooms. What you need are case studies and they're mostly confidential. "

"It sounds a bit fringe and promiscuous to me. Helena's not like that. And neither's Min."

"Look, we're not talking about swinging here. Polyamorous triads form deeply romantic relationships. I mean, we're talking romantic, domestic, sexual, not permissive or open, not like in a swingers three-way. This is exclusive, and very stable - I mean 'til death us do part. Sounds weird to you, I know. You live together, love each other, support each other, find yourselves in each other. Each satisfies a different need in the other. You're smiling."

"I can't handle a relationship with one woman. How would I manage one with two? Let's not get carried away here. I'm sure that's the last thing on Helena's mind. Do you know anyone else in that kind of relationship?"

"Yes. It's not common but I've known several over the years."

"Any of them in therapy?"

"All of them."

"I rest my case."

"You'd do it though, if Helena asked you?"

"No way. I'd never get my head around something like that."

"Even if it turned out to be the most secure, balanced and loving relationship you can imagine?"

"Balanced? Helena in the middle, snapping her fingers and me and Hermione running round making sure everything was perfect for her?"

"Sounds like you have the measure of her already."

"I don't know what's more worrying, that you might be right in what you're saying, or the feeling I'd enjoy it."

"Bless, you Finn. Maybe the reason I love you so much, is that I see in you the potential to be what I cannot. And the reason I both want you, yet don't want you at the same time is you could never be like that if you were with me. You'd just end up being *like* me. So think about this as a possibility, that right now maybe Helena and Min are searching for the right angle, the angle where all of this feels normal and natural. For each other, yes, but also for you."

"The last thing it feels like is normal and natural, Carina."

"There's no such thing as normal, Finn, never was. Normal is what people think they are when they're anything but. And, you know, what's normal about the times we live in? You're resistant to it, which tells me that in common with all fears, there's probably some mileage in exploring it."

Helena had said the exact same thing recently. *What is normal about times we live in Finn?* Sure, there were no norms any more. He thought for a while. He and Min had made love only that morning. Her eagerness first thing always thrilled him, energised him, her silken smoothness launching him through waves of sleepy heat. It had him wanting to belong,... to her,.. to this place.

He'd imagined buying another house, in time, not the place on Elm Street, something a little bigger. There was an old place on the outskirts, overlooking the sea - run down, the garden in ruins. He'd imagined himself inching it back to life, asking Min if she'd move in with him - or rather *not* asking but just letting things slide in that direction. Helena would be just down the road. Maybe they could do weeks about?

Yea right!

"I'm resistant to sticking my hand in the fire," he said. "Are you saying I should explore that too?"

"Don't be an ass."

"Okay," he said. "I'm not going back to Aylesbury. But I'm not convinced about staying here either."

"Then apply for that Irish passport, just in case things don't work out and you need an escape."

He looked away, guilty. "Already started the process," he said. "I have to register myself as a foreign birth first."

It was odd, he'd always thought of himself as English, but suddenly the mists had shifted a little and he realised all along he'd been a foreigner in his own country, a stranger in his own life. This should not have surprised him.

Do you see it Finn?

I see it Dad.

Except he hadn't seen it, and he still couldn't. To go to Ireland would not be a homecoming, it would be running even further into the unknown.

Chapter Eighty One

Squinty returned with the tide at tea-time. He was tired and wet, and more than a little grumpy on account of it. He'd had a choppy sea and squally rain for company most of the day, and it had not been an easy job. The trawler had been late, he'd had trouble keeping position, the tides and the winds for ever pulling him away from the rendezvous point. He'd been buzzed by a plane - light aircraft out for pleasure possibly, except it had the matt grey paintwork of a military craft, and that hadn't looked right to him. Squinty had responded with the finger.

He'd barely made visual contact with the trawler as it emerged from a haze before the goods were over the side and he'd had to move fast to hook them before they were carried away. It was the usual drill with these taciturn bastards. It was nothing to them if the stuff was lost. They'd done their bit, sloppy as ever. It was Squinty's lookout if the goods sank or drifted beyond his catching up with them.

They were heavy too, the goods, heavier than he'd been told, a tight sack wrapped in bubble and suspended from a flotation bag. It took some hauling aboard. He settled it between his feet, then burst the bag with a blade, cut it free and pushed it overboard, then pulled away the bubble to find a hoard of hand-guns sealed in cling film, and several boxes of ammunition. Three hundred rounds he counted, not enough to start a war, but plenty for the blinged-up drug gangs to trade and squabble over.

The guns didn't look new and were something of a mixed bag, mostly small automatics of one description or another. He didn't like that it was guns. A handgun had only the one purpose of course, which was killing people, but he reasoned most of those being shot, as well as doing the shooting were the same kind of low-life n'er-do-wells, so it wasn't worth his losing sleep over. He was probably doing society a favour by bringing the guns in. Or so he reasoned.

He left them in the locker on the boat, no sense trying to move them indoors in daylight, especially while Nina was about - she'd be watching him like a hawk, and he didn't want her nagging, or getting any more mixed up in it than she already was. He'd send her on an errand, get her out of the way first before he brought them in. It was a pity he'd lost the campsite - handy spot that for burying things, and he wondered about using it anyway as it didn't look like Finucane and the Aynslea woman were doing anything with it yet.

Rumour was they'd gone into business together, reviving the campsite in some fancy way - and rather them than him. The diggers Finucane had told him about had not turned up, - an empty threat thn - so, yes, maybe he should hide the stuff up there anyway, just be a bit more discrete about it than last time. Plus if the guns were found, it wasn't his property was it? Do that tonight then. If things went pear shaped he could always grass them up anonymously to the cops. Sure, the cops were dozy enough to fall for that, tick-box hungry for an arrest. Wipe the smile off their faces, that would. Stash of guns and bullets - terrorism and all that, and her as foreign as they come.

It would be a laugh, and serve them right.

Queer business that,... Finucane and the Aynslea woman. He'd seen them about town a couple of times now over the summer, and she wasn't anywhere near so frosty with him as she was with everyone else. He'd actually seen her smile in Finn's company, a sexy sway to her bones instead of that queen-like *I'm better than you* uprightness. Ask anyone in the King's Head, and it was her he was banging. Yet sure enough, like Nina said, it was Hermione staying over at his place most nights.

Smarmy bastard. Who did he think he was?

Sniffin' round his women!

Anyway,..

"Fishin', like I said," he said.

Nina was not convinced, even when he slapped the whiting on the counter. Truth be told, she'd never really cared for fish - strange, aquatic creatures, alien things, spending all their time in the deep and the dark, among the filth and all the bits of plastic washing out to sea these days.

"You'll be wanting this for your supper then, John?"

"Aye, with some nice fresh veg. Can you manage that?"

She quelled the sudden heaving of her stomach and set to filleting the thing. Was it just the fish that so nauseated her, or was it something else, a deeper foreboding? Why hadn't she run when she'd had the chance? And there was Squinty, happy she was convinced by his

blather, happy with his little deception, stomping upstairs for a hot shower. Meanwhile Billy the dog curled sleepily in its basket, letting out one noxious fart after the other.

She'd lied about the times she would go fishing with her grandfather, had loved the boating for his company, had mastered the sailing of it, but hated the fishing, and had never caught one. She'd lied about many things, she reflected, sadly, but they were only little things. All she'd ever wanted was someone to protect her and be nice to her, and the easiest way to win them over was to tell them what they wanted to hear.

Same the world over.

"You stink, Billy."

Billy cocked his ears, peeled open a sleepy eye, looked both hurt and mournful.

"Yes, and I am damned fool, I know. Should have gone this morning."

She stabbed the fish through the head, pinned it to the chopping board, regretted her decision to stay - and all for this stupid, foul smelling, farting mutt.

So do it now, Nina. Run, before it's too late!

But the time to have left was this morning, still with the whole day ahead of her and Squinty out at sea.

Stupid dog, stupid John Mulligan, stupid Nina. Stupid. Stupid.

She thought of Finn, then. Nice, safe, quiet Finn. But how could he help her now? She didn't even know where he lived. Perhaps he'd be at the cafe? The Sea View Cafe, he'd said. All friends there and Squinty not welcome - which made it sound like a paradise. Except it was closed today.

Morning then. She would go there in the morning.

Sure,... Fuck this, she thought.

Squinty was thinking the same, though the 'this' he wanted to fuck was Nina, and with a growing urgency - indeed it was an urgency that grew

harder the longer the shower worked upon him. Her passport and things were on the way. Maybe he'd even have them tomorrow. She was his now, his slave,... well sort of. He owned her documents. He could do whatever he wanted with her, and she had to be grateful for it.

He thought about it as he towelled himself dry. Oh yes, he was feeling up for a shag, and it was high time Nina earned her keep. So, he padded softly downstairs, just a towel around his waist. There he folded his arms, posed himself nonchalantly against the door frame, at the bottom of the stairs and watched her for a while. She was staring out of the window now, motionless, something dreamy about her, something arousing too about the way she leaned against the counter, pressing her pubic bone into it, something arousing in the tone of her thighs, the curve of the buttocks. He was perhaps thinking to impress her with his manboobs.

Fancy getting all the way up that, eh Squinty?

No more wanking over smut.

He felt the erection under the towel, pressing against it, straining against it, enjoyed the feel of it,... wondered if he might test the water a little,...

"I were just thinkin'," he said.

Startled, Nina spun round. Just then the towel burst against the pressure, unwound to a climax, so to speak, hung awkwardly upon the hook of his manhood, then dropped leaving Squinty in full mating display. It was more than he'd intended, but oh,.. well,... it was done now. Maybe she'd be impressed. He'd been told more than once he was well endowed in that department, and there wasn't a woman born who could resist a man with a big dick! Was there?

Nina screamed and pulled the knife from the fish's head.

Shit,... maybe not.

Squinty decided it was time to retreat, took up the towel and turned, began to back away up the stairs.

"Sorry love,... I didn't mean,.."

Billy, aroused by the scream and Nina's obvious alarm, assessed the threat, read body language, and even though Squinty was the less aggressively posed and was retreating, and had served as Billy's master for a long time, Billy had to decide whose side he was on, and chose the current hand that fed him as against the hand that regularly beat him.

Billy sprang into action. The quarry was in flight - pale, moon sized buttocks a-wobbling, an offence to common decency.

Chapter Eighty Two

Hermione is dozing, wakes with the sun. It feels like dawn but it's late afternoon, the day turning fine at last after squally rain, a thin light filtering through floaty nets. The room has a clean scented newness about it, a thing she'd not noticed earlier, not when they'd first come in. Then she'd been able to smell only Helena's perfume, and her skin - and the shower gel she'd first smelled the day she'd showered at Helena's house and felt so strange about it, as if in premonition of something that was then unimaginable.

This moment.

And of course, she'd been afraid - Helena looking so beautiful and confident, and Hermione thinking she could not let her be the dominant one, or she would vanish into this woman's shadow, gobbled up by her vagina, cease entirely to be.

The receptionist had looked about sixteen, long blonde hair cascading about the shoulders of her cheap suit. Hermione had scrutinised her for signs of judgement - two women checking in, in the middle of the day.

I mean it's obvious isn't it?

But there'd been nothing - or rather it had been more of Hermione's own making - the nerves, the guilt - also the extraordinary feeling of being a tart, as Helena, spoiled millionairess, had swiped her card to pay for the room.

Pay for her.

Of course Helena was not a millionairess - nowhere near, probably, or if she was, a million isn't what it used to be, but there was still a danger in it.

Or in letting it be so.

Or in the thinking of it.

Or something.

Helena is propped on one elbow now, watching, her eyes lighting up at Hermione's recognition, and at the returning memory of what they had

done. And what they had done was more shocking even than Hermione had imagined, more shocking than the prosaic rubbing of fingers against clitoris. No,... worse than that, it had been tender, and searching. They had made love!

She feels a moment of vertigo now as sleep fades and she is fixed once more in reality, a reality altered by that memory, by the awareness of a new softness and warmth, and what has lately, by stealthy degrees, become an obsessive need for the intimate presence in her life of a woman.

This woman.

Helena.

Queen of Carrickbar.
Ice Queen, Helena no-nicks.

The love of her life.

How on earth did that happen?

She has slept with girls before, friends on sleep-overs, camping trips, teenage truth or dare nights giggling long and late, but has not thought ever to want this. And now in granting herself permission to want it, it is as if she has opened a door on escape from all the things that have formerly oppressed her.

What has she done?

Well, she's betrayed Finn for a start*, the nicest guy she's ever known,* and in so doing has conquered Helena.

No.

Conquer is not the right word.

Helena chose submission, chose Hermione to submit herself to, because she needed it, was tired of fighting, and because in Hermione she had recognised someone who would not damage her. So she had lifted her dress, unafraid, shimmied out of her under-things and laid down upon the bed, bare, exposed, scars and all, and waited for Hermione to contemplate the next move.

Hermione had looked at her, knees wide, swaying playfully.

"Best just to do it, darling," Helena had said.

So, Hermione, still clothed, somewhat numb and self conscious in the moment had melted herself sufficiently to nod dry mouthed in agreement, while inwardly recoiling from the cold mechanics of it. So she had softened the mood somewhat by tender noises to which Helena had responded by relaxing back against the pillows.

"Just tell me if you wanna stop, okay?" said Hermione, half hoping they could get away without starting at all, just laughing it off, then making tea, and driving home embarrassed but still friends.

But Helena was definitely up for it.

So Hermione had knelt between Helena's knees, made a slender penis of her index and middle fingers and ventured it upon Helena's cleft, while gently slipping the other hand into the hollow of Helena's waist. And, with a breath, thus Hermione entered deep and with a warm, slippery ease, and with a gentle rhythm, circling also slowly with her thumb upon the button of Helena's sex.

The scent of sex!

Was it to arouse men, this scent? Good job then Hermione could be aroused even by her own scent. Meanwhile Helena, impaled upon Hermione's fingers had gripped the sheets on ether side for greater purchase and her thighs had gyrated greedily for advantage.

She had come slowly, and incrementally with each rise of her quivering belly, eyes finally turned up beneath their lids in *petit mort*, then lay back, spent in trembling languor. Hermione had covered her, slipped off her jeans and blouse and slid beside her, held her snug, and safe, and warm. And there Helena had lain, quivering quietly for a time, breathing ragged as the shock subsided, then she had turned mumbling, and sought Hermione's breast, lay easy there at last, and quiet. And slept.

Then Hermione had slept.

And now Helena watches.

Oh,... stupid tart. What have I done?

Finn had said it was okay, this thing, but Finn had not imagined the sweet tenderness of it. He had imagined it perhaps naively as merely the pushing of a button to cheer Helena up, then the straightening of hair and dresses and a return to tea, and chit-chat and normality. Girl stuff.

Fool!

Stupid! Stupid!

There could be no going back from this.

Helena is manoeuvring herself atop now, opening legs like scissors, slotting together neat as a puzzle, the enigma of this thing between them.

"Now is my turn for trousers, darling. You give them to me, yes?"

Hermione feels the panic rising for this thing she wants but also fears, both the thing itself and the wanting of it. "Wait, what time is it?"

"Plenty time."

"But,... but you wanted me to do it,... for you, that's all. It's what you said. I thought,..."

"Yes,... and now I want for you."

"But,.."

"You don't want?"

She cannot not say yes or no, only knows for sure she is not resisting as Helena manoeuvres deeper for advantage - sex to sex,... the sheer electrifying press of it. Helena rises, proud, haughty, loosens Hermione's bra, melts it away, works the crotch of her pants, hooks it aside with her thumb, and Hermione feels herself lost, swooning in anticipation.

Yes, she wants it.

Helena begins to gyrate at first ever so gently, but with a growing pressure and urgency.

"Careful of your back," says Hermione.

Helena pouts. "Never mind that. I do anything for you, Hermione. Tell me what you want."

Hmmm,... easy.

"Want someone to tell me how much they want me, and that they love me. And that they mean it."

Helena nods, though she is momentarily distracted and determined she too shall have a body like Hermione's before her own dissolves into the tardiness of middle age.

"I mean it," says Helena.

Sure.

Helena says.

But this is Helena of the clouds and they're both drunk again, so it is a truth only if they can live without defences, and that's impossible. Defences, masks, stories, lies, all the petty deceivers of love. And speaking of lies, there's something else. Hermione knows, as Helena goes to work on her properly now, there's no way this is the first time Helena has been with a woman. Hermione has been deceived and seduced.

And you know what?

She doesn't care.

Chapter Eighty Three

Late afternoon and Finn had not yet heard from Hermione. He'd texted once, but did not want to do so again for fear of seeming to her like an overly possessive lover, so he texted Carina instead: *Hermione with you?*

Carina texted back at once: *Nope.*

And, still determined to avoid the trap of the overly possessive lover, he returned: *Okay. Dinner then? You and me?*

And she returned: *Your treat this time.*

Okay, I know somewhere cheap.

Ha.

But he was thinking of the hotel where he had once taken Helena, thinking of that night, bedazzled by a thing he could not have, nor less believed he actually wanted. A man in love might honestly say that knowing his lover made him know a better side of himself. Knowing Helena made you somebody else altogether, or at least held the promise of transformation into that person you always wanted to be.

He would have to grow out of this eventually though, he thought - this middle aged, middle class obsession with dinner in middling restaurants. If the BREXIT predictions were correct, the ten years of austerity England had already suffered would be as nothing, and things were set to be a whole lot worse. For now it was a pleasure he enjoyed though, and more often of late in the company of a variety of beautiful women, and Hermione would show up when she was ready, whether he was anxious about her or not.

So,...

He showered, shaved, opened his watch box - ten of the best, restored pieces of the past, each hopeful of an airing. Which to wear? The Roamer? The Bernie? The Omega? How about that little Timex he'd once loaned Kyle?

Dammit, Finn, did any of it matter?

Yes, of course it mattered. For a start, Carina was wise to him; and had long since broken this cipher of the watches. What he wanted to

wear was the Omega because it felt like an Omega occasion, any occasion with Carina, that is. So he chose the Roamer again to put her off the scent. It was gaining a little these days, but he reckoned even he could avoid running ahead of himself too far for one evening.

He took the car, drove around to the Sea View, a beautiful amber evening in the making. Perhaps if they came back early enough, they could fit in a sunset walk along the beach - him, Carina, Hermione too of course,... if she'd returned by then.

Pique, Finn?

Don't be ridiculous.

And Helena? Can she come too?

Sure, that would be interesting.

Helena, damn her!

What was it Carina had once called it - his Anima harem? For a man who claimed to be so ill at ease among women he was getting his fair share of exposure to them now, but he felt certain he was none the better for it. They still perplexed him, and as he neared his half century, he knew none of that was going to change. With most women, he reckoned, success in a relationship was never about asking the right question, more a question of never asking the wrong one.

He was not meant for relationships, too self absorbed, too conscious of his imperfect self. Success in relationships involved being entirely unconscious of one's imperfections.

Oh, come on Finn, buck up, lad!

He tapped on the side door to the flat and Carina emerged, hair fluffed out, smelling good. The sight of her took him back to his teens and to the eighties dives of Aylesbury, to the new romantics, to the sweet vibrato of Stevie Nicks and the electro-drama of Ultravox. He'd no idea what the background music to life was these days. He'd stopped listening to it a long time ago. The past seemed always the safer, the surer guide.

But the past is dead, Finn, and the future does not exist. All you'll ever have is now.

This moment.

"Hermione not back yet?" she asked, curious.

"Not yet."

"You've called her?"

"Texted. No reply."

"So call her."

Finn squirmed. "Well,... maybe later - I don't want to come across as possessive, you know?"

Carina read the anxiety, knew he would have denied it even to himself, that he was anxious for her. "How terribly accommodating of you," she said.

"What time did they go? Mid morning, wasn't it?"

"It was about ten, yes." Carina caught his arm, squeezed gently, laughed it off. "She'll be fine. She's a big girl."

"Sure, I know. It was just,.. with Helena being ill, you know,... I mean she seems fine now, but,..."

"They can take care of themselves."

But it was more than that. By now Finn knew something was wrong,... he felt it in his gut - well, not *wrong* exactly, more that something had changed, shifted up a notch and was accelerating beyond his reach. He felt empty of a sudden, thrown back upon himself. Since he and Hermione had become lovers, there had been very little distance between them, always the knowledge of the whereabouts of the other, of the next rendezvous, time and place, and never any doubt of the next intimate connection. Might she be in trouble? It didn't seem likely, with Helena around. Helena had this wonder-woman air about her, a demeanour that could chase away demons, so it was inconceivable they were in any trouble, unless Helena *was* the trouble, and not sickness trouble, more Helena *causing* trouble.

He could hide it from himself no longer then: *They'd done it.* They were

away in a hotel somewhere, shagging each other's brains out. But before he could give himself over to thinking any more about that, or brooding upon it, or projecting one of Carina's weird triangular relationships far into the future, there was a commotion on the promenade, someone running towards them, calling his name.

It was Nina.

"Nina? You all right?"

It was a stupid question. Clearly Nina was not all right. She was trembling with emotion, eyes brimming with tears and breathless from her run. Her belly and breast were dark with blood, and she held a large kitchen knife, her hand and arm slick also with blood.

"I've killed him. Mr. Finn."

For a moment time froze and Finn felt himself stepping out into another reality, one where bad stuff happened and people did violent and stupid things all the time. "Mulligan?"

Nina looked at the knife as if only now realising it was still there, was horrified by it. "No. Billy. John is hurt. Billy attacked him. Bit him. It's such a mess. I didn't know what else to do."

"Billy?"

Nina took a deep breath, wiped her eyes on the backs of her hands, smeared her face with blood, steadied herself. This man Finn, he was a nice enough guy, you know, but a little slow sometimes. "The dog," she explained.

"Ah,... Billy's,.. dead?"

Finn was relieved, reality shifting back into focus somewhat, except Nina, this sleight, lovely woman had just killed a monster of a dog with her bare hands and a vegetable knife, a dog she cared about. He could not bring himself to imagine the struggle.

When they arrived, they found the kitchen was a scene of carnage, the linoleum slick with great smears of blood and Billy a giant, lifeless rug, crumpled in a corner of the room. Squinty lay back on the stairs where Billy had left him, and where Nina had administered the fatal slice to its throat. There were splatters of blood up the walls, a twisted tea-towel

knotted tight around Squinty's thigh, a grizzly wound in his leg. He was white with shock, trembling, made no move to cover himself as Carina bent over him.

"You tied this tourniquet?" she asked Nina.

Nina nodded. "There was such a lot of blood coming out of him. I think Billy bit through an artery. I was,.. in the army. They teach me first-aid. Only useful thing they teach me."

Finn could not decide which was worse, the wound in Squinty's leg, more blood than he'd ever seen in his life, or the picture of a man fetched up suddenly without clothes or dignity, like a hairy whale beached on the stairs. And,...

Fuck, he was,... huge!

One would not think it to look at the rest of him.

Carina attended as best she could, called back over her shoulder to Nina. "You called an ambulance?"

"They said twenty minutes but it has been longer than that already. I didn't know what else to do."

"We're a bit out of the way here. It could be a while - ambulance service is struggling these days. You did the right thing." Then she asked for a blanket to cover Squinty.

Nina brought two, one for Squinty, the other to cover Billy. The blanket over Billy was laid with greater delicacy.

"Will he be all right?"

"I'm not dead yet," growled Squinty. It seemed to take great effort. "No thanks to you, stupid bitch. What did you think I was going to do? Why'd ya kick off like that?" He collapsed back, coughing, grimacing.

Carina calmed him. "Lie still now, Mr Mulligan." Then to Nina: "You probably saved his life."

She motioned with her eyes for Finn to take Nina out, sensing that whatever had happened here, they were not good company for one another. Finn wondered about calling the police. I mean there was

such a lot of blood, and a woman with a knife and the body of a dog bigger than a man. But what was there to tell? A mad dog had gone for its master and the housekeeper had saved him, stabbing the dog several times, and when that hadn't worked, she'd cut its throat commando style. Why would the police be even remotely interested in that? Given the reduction in numbers it might be weeks before they even answered the telephone. And then there was Nina, obviously vulnerable, no passport or id, prey for a lazy hit by the authorities.

Better to say nothing.

"What about you, Nina," he said. "Are you hurt?"

She shook her head, hadn't really thought about it..

"Then, why don't you go change your clothes. Clean up. Then we'll get some air. Nothing more we can do here. Carina knows what she's doing."

She nodded, stepped gingerly around Squinty's body and made her way upstairs to shower. Maybe the ambulance crew would decide whether the police were needed, but Finn certainly wasn't going to endanger Nina any further by calling them himself.

By the time she'd showered and changed her clothes, the ambulance had arrived and Squinty was being carried out.

"You want to go with him?" asked Carina.

Nina paused for a moment. "He will live?"

Carina nodded.

Nina curled her lip in contempt. "Then no. Fuck him."

"Okay. I'll ride with him. Finn, you'll pick me up later, yes?"

"Sure. I'll follow the ambulance."

"No, make sure Nina's okay first. All right? I'll call you."

So they sat out on the promenade, he and Nina, and watched the ambulance go. Nina's hands were still trembling, but she was breathing easier. Finn was no less shaken by things, and Nina realised

it, sensed it in his silence, wondered how to break it, how to begin relating to this man.

"You really thought I might have murdered Mr Mulligan?"

"Well, I know what he's like, so I wouldn't have blamed you."

He was smiling, joking, but then he remembered the dog, imagined Nina's struggle with it, and the smile faded.

"She did not need to do that," said Nina. "I mean your friend."

"Ride with him? Carina's a doctor."

"Ah! Lucky for him then."

"Lucky for him you knew how to stop him bleeding to death in the first place."

"My fault the dog attacked him."

"It was the dog's fault the dog attacked him. It was a bloody stupid dog."

"Mad, yes. At times. But good company too."

Finn was thinking what she probably needed more than anything right now was a cup of tea, and since the Sea View was closed maybe he should take her back to his place, let her rest there a while. But how would that look, if Hermione walked in?

What?

Are you making Hermione your wife already Finn?

Nina's in trouble.

Prioritise.

And anyway, Hermione's,...

No, you don't know that for sure.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I know you'd grown attached to him. He

seemed,... calmer when he was with you. The dog I mean." Though for all he knew he might have been talking about Squinty as well.

"A little love and attention, a feeling of belonging. These are the only things any of us need Mr. Finn. And now I've murdered him. So much for his faith in me."

"Will you be okay?"

"Well, I think for sure my employment here is terminated. But I'll be fine. You need housekeeper?"

"Em,.."

"Bad joke. Sorry. I never keep house for man again as long as I live"

"What'll you do?"

She shook her head, shrugged, smiled, fished her passport from her bag and showed it to him. "I have silver linings."

"He gave it back to you?"

"No. It was in his mail. I think he was going to hide it from me, maybe. I don't know what he promised them to get it, but that's his business. So, now I have passport Mr Finn, I am free. I also have money. I'll be all right now."

"I'm happy for you,... relieved,... but you clearly can't stay here."

"In Carrickbar?"

"I mean *here*, Squinty's place, the garage. And maybe Carrickbar's not safe either. You have your passport back but those people you fell in with,... they may come looking."

"Maybe. I have worried about it. But why would they? I'm not worth anything - too old for prostitute. They only use me to get hooks into him. Foolish man."

"You say that, but I think you were a little bit fond of him."

Nina blushed, looked away. "I thought I could help him. I thought maybe with a little help he could be set on another path."

"You thought you could redeem him?"

"More fool me."

"His loss, not yours. You're a decent person Nina. He's a waste of space."

"Still, now he is useless to them, maybe they will leave him alone, which means silver linings for him too, if he is smart enough to see it that way."

Then the cop car arrived - flashing lights, all the way from Weston probably, but other than that no particular air of hurry. A lone hi-vis stepped out, jacked up its trousers, weighed up the scene.

Finn and Nina watched for a while like a couple of idle bystanders.

"Maybe you should just disappear," he said. "Walk away. No need to get involved."

"Why should I? I have nothing to hide." She stood up, took a deep breath, prepared to meet her fate in the hi-vis and the flashing blue light. "Your policeman have no guns?"

"Mostly not. They have Tasers though - can be a bit trigger happy with those."

"Taser?"

"Stun gun. Want me to stay with you?"

"Why would you do that?"

"Because Carina asked me to."

"You do everything she asks?"

"So far."

She cracked a grin. "Then be more careful what she asks in future. But thank you, yes. You can make sure I use correct language when questioned. I do not want to be stun gunned in street on basis of error in use of grammar."

The cop turned at their approach, a big man, sour, a face that spoke of having been disturbed from other things, and this had better be good.

Have you the time, officer?

Not a lot these days, sir, no.

How to explain all of this then?

Succinctly, I suggest.

Nina took a breath, addressed the cop with an air of resignation. "So, officer. Come. I show you body. It was me who killed him."

Finn cringed. "Em,.. she's still in shock, mate. And she loved that dog."

His phone pinged. Message from Hermione at last:

With Helena. Back tonight. Need to talk. Trust me, darlin' everything will be all right. Love H.

Need to talk? Trust me?

So,... no further confirmation needed. They'd done it.

She and Helena.

They'd done that *thing*, and it had seemed such a little thing to him at the time of asking, yet now it filled his head to awesome proportions and changed everything. He'd known it would, but had been too polite to say so at the time, or too lacking in the conviction that he wanted to possess all of Hermione, possess her like Squinty had wanted to possess Nina, even to the extent of her slavery and complete subjugation.

What Finn had wanted, exactly, what he wanted now remained a mystery. Perhaps he should just be content to make his peace with whatever was left. And if there was nothing, then be content with that also. Why was it the more he craved simplicity the more complicated his life became?

He took a deep breath, followed Nina and the cop inside.

Chapter Eighty Four

A hot night, Finn and Carina making their way back from Lancaster with the windows down. Carina lay her head against the door pillar, eyes lightly closed, letting the air blow her hair, blow away the scent of trauma from the hospital where she'd sat for hours frustrated by her statutorily imposed uselessness.

Squinty's condition had been serious but not life threatening, so he'd had to take his turn in the gridlock of trolleys in the A+E department - no luxury fast-track ticket of imminent death for him. There, Carina had been redundant amid the melee, hamstrung by her suspension from medical duty, assertive only in ensuring his stabilisation. When she could do no more, she called Finn to get her out of there.

"It was like a warzone, Finn."

"Nothing like an evening in A+E for bringing it home to you - I mean the scale of things."

"But it was never as bad as that at home, surely?"

"These days, yes. It was getting impossible to find the money for it, and always my worst nightmare, you know? Squeezing money out of the A+E budget, then thinking it would serve me right if I had a car crash on the way home and I needed them to stitch me back together."

"But that's all over for you now. And it was never your fault anyway."

"I chose to do that job."

"No you didn't. The job was something else when you began it, like mine was. And,.. like mine it became something else over time. And now we're not doing it any more. But let's not dwell on the past. You hungry?"

"Starving. Sorry about dinner - getting a bit late now, I suppose. Buy you fish and chips instead? Chippey's not bad in Carrickbar."

"Sounds lovely. Nina okay?"

"For now."

"I felt useless back there. I know accident and emergency isn't exactly

my speciality, but there were people who'd been waiting for hours, and I could have helped them. It's like I'm being told something. *Move on, Carina. Get out while you can. Go back to your books, to private practice, and all those rich loonies.*"

"I don't like it when you're depressed."

"Says you. But I suspect you're back on track. Just as well I turned up when I did."

"True."

"Hermione's worth it, Finn. On the one hand she puts on a good show, you know? Order, routine, white paint and polished chrome. But there's something else, something deeper. Others feel safe around her. You feel safe. I feel safe, loved - even though she half suspects I've come to steal you away from her. You stick with her if she'll let you. She's the mother we've all lost or always wanted."

"Mother? Have you been drinking?"

"Not yet."

"Well, I'm not sure what she'd think to hear herself described that way. "

"You heard from her, yet? I mean,... Hermione."

"Text."

"And she's okay?"

"Think so. Says she's with Helena. And we need to talk."

"So,... you reckon they've done it then?"

"I'm assuming so, yes."

"Oh, Finn. I'm sorry. I know you like things simple, and I really don't know what they're playing at. It sounds like one thing,... like the obvious thing, you know? But I'm sure there's more to it. Just,... try to roll with it. Don't be,... egotistical. Don't get angry."

"It's not in me, Carina."

"I know. And I wish I could stick around to see you through the rest of it but I'm going back in the morning."

"Oh?"

"Email from the head of department. There's a meeting on Friday. Reviewing my case. He sounded suspiciously contrite."

"Good sign then? Still, I wish you didn't have to go right now."

"I know. But keep me posted okay?"

"Sure. You're the only one I can talk to."

"No I'm not. I'm maybe the only one you're not afraid to talk to, I mean properly, but that's your fault, and not altogether wise given how I feel about you. So talk to them like you talk to me. Start speaking your mind. Tell them what you want, or at least what you don't want."

"I wish I knew what I wanted."

"So, worst case: Helena and Hermione could be an item now, and you on your Jack Jones up here in this grim northern seaside shanty town with your plummy southern accent sticking out like a sore thumb, fixing broken watches no one wants for the rest of your life, and as usual being ever so polite about it. Could you deal with that, and still resist the urge to run back to Aylesbury, plug yourself back into your old life?"

"I don't know."

She smiled, but it was a sad sort of smile. "Which is another reason you need to sell your damned house before the kids move back in."

"But what do they want from me, Carina?"

"Your kids? Same as usual. Your house like a hotel for them to crash in, meals on the table even when they can't be bothered turning up for them."

"Not my kids. Helena and Hermione."

"Oh,... that's easy. They just want to be with you, Finn. So maybe

you've got to ask yourself the same thing: what it is you want from them. It could be the usual choice is reversed. They come as a pair now. You accept both into your life, or neither."

So much for stability then. He'd imagined he could settle down to a quiet life, eventually, with Hermione, get back some way towards the dull uneventful day-to-dayness that had been the characteristic of the past few decades of his life. Get back to something warm and safe, even though it had been a lie.

But with Helena as part of the intimate mix?

The truth was not always easy to see or know or adequately deal with. What was true brought with it always the promise of sweeping change. It laid waste to continents. It built you up, then broke you down again. Was he man enough to handle that? Was rejecting it not simply an abdication of life, anyway.

In short, had he come to Carrickbar to live?

Or to die?

Chapter Eighty Five

Hermione had woken again, this time to a light that was deepening for evening. It was a long time since she'd last spent the day in bed having sex, and dozing between stupendous orgasms, a long time since she'd had a partner who could keep it up all day like that. Yes, Finn was a warm and considerate lover, but he was strictly a one shot kind of guy, maybe twice if gently coaxed.

Helena on the other hand,...

"You lied," she says, but as she says it, she cannot help the smile that softens the accusation into a tease.

"Oh?"

Helena is dressed now, watching from across the room, brushing out her hair in long slow strokes of the comb. It's damp from the shower, and there is the sense about her that it is time to move on now to other things. Hermione is not sure she wants to.

"That was some performance for a newbie."

"Oh? What is newbie please?"

"You told me you'd never been with a woman before."

"I never said I have not been with a woman before. This is something you assume, because I am married."

Hermione is sure she'd said it at some point, but in any case forgives it, because this is nothing she does not want, at least right now. Solving the paradox of wanting both her and Finn is for the future. "Is that the real reason you left him then? Your husband."

"Because I discover I prefer women to him? No. All right,... I may have been untruthful to you in this. I did not want you to think I was seducing you for real."

"You mean you weren't?"

"Possibly I was. I don't know. I have been with a woman before, yes. First lover after leaving Georgia was a woman. We meet in Paris. She was person of great beauty, powerful, passionate. It was an unexpected thing for me, and a long time ago. What can I say? But

you know,... after sex, comes always the game of power. Always. Each of us dominates who will wear the trousers. This is not a recipe for happy-endings. Then I meet husband, who is looking for trophy blonde with long legs. He is also wealthy, comes with British passport, and possibility of permanent leave to remain in this country, so I am happy to overlook his shortcomings."

"I can't believe you were so mercenary."

"Believe me, darling, to have official leave to remain in this country is a thing many will die for. All I do is get married. But it is affair of love, in both cases, for sure, for a time. And he is passable lover. Anyway, we are the same now, equals, because you lied also."

"When did I lie?"

"When I asked if you have children you tell me no. I saw it in your eyes when you answered. I saw the pain, and I knew. And this is when I fall in love with you."

"Okay, got me there." Hermione feels the shock of those words again. *Fall in love,... with you,...*

Helena loves her, and she doesn't care if it's not true. It's enough just to hear her say it.

"You didn't trust me to share this information?"

"Not at the time, no."

"And now?"

"I think by now I've trusted you with a lot more than that, Helena."

Hermione's phone bleeps: incoming text. She uses the interruption to her advantage, uncomfortable of a sudden with the direction of this post coital conversation.

Finn: Hope all's well with you? Kiss. Smiley face. Thumbs up.

"Ah, look. Bless him."

Helena nods, checks the time. "He is not dominating. Or it would be texts every half hour, then angry phone calls by now. I love this man.

Even if he is shagging Carina."

"He's *not*. Will you stop saying that. He's absolutely not doing that, okay?"
"Then there is something wrong with him."

"Well, I think that's obvious. Of course there's somethin' wrong with him. He's had a nervous breakdown, and Carina's been a good friend and a colleague and a psychoanalyst,... or somethin', and she's pulled him out of it, all right? But he's not sha,.. he's not doin' that with Carina, because he's doin' it with me. Okay?"

"If you want to believe this I am willing also."

"Except,... how can he be with me,... I mean now, after this? First his wife, and now me. This'll set 'im back years. And I know I should've thought of that before, but I din't want to. I just *wanted* it, and I was sure I was in control, and now I know I'm not."

"We can keep it a secret."

"No! I'm not 'avin that. Not for your sake or mine, or Finn's. We got to be honest."

"All right, so does this mean, having come this far, you want to do it again?"

"You mean right now?"

Helena smiles in apology. "I think we are both a little sore for that. I mean, another time, whenever we can. As soon as possible. Swear to honesty, Hermione? Do you want me like this,... again."

Hermione knows it's not right to want it, not while she's with someone else, but she does, and she is sworn to honesty, so she says: "Yes. Desperately."

Helena catches her breath as another piece of the puzzle slots into place, safe. It was meant to be a one time only thing, but she'd always known and hoped it would be more than that, but also that she did not want a wife, did not want to live with a woman, that she wanted the woman to be happy with a man, just hers for the taking whenever she wanted it. And if that was wrong, then to hell with it. But above all she wanted both Finn and Hermione together and committed and loving

her, and bound to her in life and ultimately in death. And why? Well, she tells herself she might then be more assured of them being bound together, and to Kyle, through her. Except,... she does not want to die, yet dares not hope for the future, if she should live.

"I want it too," she says. "But,... you also want Finn? Again, swear to honesty."

She swears to honesty, and easily, but that does not mean she can reconcile these two divergent wants,.. still, say it Hermione: "Yes, I want him too."

"And I say truly to you that I want that you want him."

Query: Is that because Helena does not want Hermione enough? Feeling of knots forming in the gut!

"Why? That's just not right, not *normal*, Helena. If we were proper lovers you couldn't bear to think of Finn puttin' his hands on me ever again."

"On the contrary. It excites me. Because I too love Finn. And if you couldn't, with Finn, I would have to, in order to keep him close to us. But I am not the right lover for a man like Finn. Not for long. It would not last as long as it will need to do. And I may be dead in six months, and all for nothing. And then you will both have your lives simple again."

There she goes.

"You on that medication?"

Helena smiles, serene. "No. Why you always think this? It's a long time since I feel so complete, so calm. Listen, I tell you how it is, I tell you the secret, how it is going to be from this day. You know it too, but you are afraid to put it into words."

"Okay. This'll be good."

"I am Kyle's mother."

"Well, obviously."

"Finn is his father, my ex husband,... but there is still a part of us in

love."

Hermione rolls her eyes "Oh, yea?"

"You are Anica's mother. This is not wishful thinking or foolishness in you. She will allow it. I have seen it in her."

"Maybe."

"Finn loves Anica too, and she is natural and warm with him. I have seen it, so he should be her father as well as Kyle's. And a father needs a wife, which is you. These are flexible concepts, you understand?"

"Nope, definitely losin' me now."

"But you feel this, I know you do. You are strong Hermione. You know how to keep others safe. We are the link, you and I. We bind everything together. I trust the future to you. I love no one more than I love Kyle, but if I am gone soon, I trust no one more with him than I do you,... and Finn.

"So you must also have Finn, so he is bound to us, otherwise he will have no reason to stay, and will waste his life following Carina who is his intellectual superior, and so sexually messed up she is probably still a virgin. He is dazzled by her, clearly, but she cannot make him happy."

"I can't think of anything more controlling, more devious and underhand than that."

"If it's done with love, and carefully, he will want it too."

"But you're forgettin' one thing, Helena. Me and Finn, it's over! I go home now and he'll smell you all over me, and anyway I'll have to tell him, and then that's it. It's just you and me then, a couple of bi-girls makin' out in some grim town up norf. And Finn'll clear off somewhere, yes with Carina maybe, I dunno,... messed up or not, so what you've just said, it'll never work."

"Maybe it would have been difficult, once, but not any more. The world is crazy, Hermione. Certainty lasts no more than a day these days. Why waste what little time we might have thinking what is normal any more, when we could be exploring what is new and possible. You don't

trust me on this?"

"I trust you mean what you say. It's just that most of the time what you say is total bollocks, if you mean it or not. So come on, what am I going to tell Finn? I'll not lie to him."

"Tell him nothing. This is between women. It is not for him to understand, and he knows that. He will not put you in a position where you have to lie."

"But he'll want to know."

"I judge he already knows, judge also he will not ask why. And so long as he feels safe with you, that he can make love with you, be tender with you, he will never ask this question. It would be,... impolite, unkind, to you, to me. Truly, I am coming to understand you English. You are more French than you think. Ironic no? It takes BREXIT to teach you this."

"But,... what if I can't, I mean make love with him after this? And if a man needs a wife, and he's supposed to be Kyle's father, why don't *you* be his wife?"

"We've discussed this. I *am* his wife. His ex wife. And soon I may be dead."

"But what if I go back to Finn, and,... *I can't do it, Helena?"*

"Then I will have to do it instead. And gladly, this man who could make me laugh, while making love."

Hermione feels the shock of it then, and the certainty of what she wants. And what she wants is everything, which is impossible. "Don't you fuckin' dare."

Helena pouts beautifully. "Then do not make me."

"You wouldn't though, would you? I mean really?"

"For sure, yes. I have always found him sexually attractive. But I would rather it be you because I told myself a long time ago I was through with men. They are such messy, untidy creatures. And rarely good with their hands. In this Finn is an exception, I take it?"

Hermione blushes. "Hard to disagree with you there."

"Then I am prepared to reconsider my vows, but only if absolutely necessary."

Impossible to read Helena now. Is she serious? Better err on the side of caution, Hermione, assume that she is. "So,.. how do I reply to Finn's text?"

"Easy. You say: *trust me, darlin' everything will be all right.* And he will trust you. This is not deceiving him, because everything *will* be all right."

"We'll need to talk though."

Helena sighs, impatient, but softens it with a long, loving look. "If you must. Just be *very* careful what you say to him."

Hermione shakes her head in exasperation, wraps herself in the bedsheet and comes to Helena, kneels before her, lays a hand upon her lap, pays her respects to the Queen of Carrickbar. "Listen, you don't need none of this, you daft cow."

"Maybe if I thought I would live to old age, Hermione. But now there is very real risk I will not. It makes one less,... caring for conventions."

"And everything you're doin', you're doing for Kyle. I get that. But you don't need this crazy web, this *story*, Helena. First, you're not goin' anywhere, but if you are, then I will be Kyle's mother, yes, I promise you. And Finn will be his father. Why? Because we both love him. He's already protected, Helena, because we both love him. You understand that?"

Helena closes her eyes, smiles uneasily. "Your love protects me too?"

"Damned right it does."

She imagines Helena then, as she has already seen her, hot and smooth and nude, hips gyrating atop, but it's Finn she's atop of now. And Hermione is thinking it's strange she doesn't feel the old jealousy, for from the very beginning she had assumed it was how their story had begun, or at least how it would end, and her out in the cold and alone and friendless.

Again.

But now, so long as she gets to keep them both, she realises it's a thing she actually wants, and more to witness them: Helena and Finn. Of course it's not always healthy to chase what you want, but similarly unhealthy to trust those who write the rules, even at the expense of your own nature.

"You are looking lustful again, Hermione. I had no idea, your capacity for physical love."

"Let's just say you're a bad influence, Helena. I'd best go shower."

Chapter Eighty Six

They ate cones of fat crispy chips on the beach at Carrickbar. There was a thin slice of a moon, and the night was warm. They were not alone. Small groups of youths had come down and lit sweet scented, fires of driftwood. They sat around drinking beers and laughing, ignoring a future that was non-existent, and all of them seeming inappropriately sanguine in spite of it.

Carina sipped on a can of Coke, declared it the unhealthiest, happiest evening she had spent in a long time, declared again her undying love for Finn before reminding him she'd be gone in the morning, probably before he was awake, and that it was best that way.

For both of them.

So when he left her outside the flat, he kissed her goodnight - an unashamed press of the lips, and he didn't care how it looked, because this was their last goodbye, and she'd told him that if they met again in the flesh, she would happily ruin herself by making a lover of him and declaring it for ever. It was just a pity she'd not meant it, he thought. Or maybe she had, but that didn't simplify things much either way.

Hermione had still not returned, nor was she at the house on Elm Street when he walked in. And Nina was quiet, keeping to the spare room, no doubt wondering how she'd managed to swap one man's house for another in the space of a day.

He sat down at the desk and switched on the lamp, illuminating the parts of a watch he'd stripped only that morning. There was still the spring to remove before he could put the parts in the washer, but he checked the steadiness of his hands and found them lacking, so he brewed tea instead, and took it to bed.

There was no light showing under Nina's door, so he thought it best to let her be. They'd have to talk about her situation some more tomorrow. He'd already told her he'd help with whatever she decided. As he peeled off his clothes he felt himself overcome with waves of fatigue, and each one greater than the last, so he slid into bed and slept, leaving the tea to go cold. And sleeping he dreamed the sound of the bedroom door opening, and a woman sliding in, hot and nude beside him. At least, he thought he was dreaming. And in the darkness, and in the dreaming, he could not tell who it was. He assumed it was Hermione, come back to him at last, after a day with

Helena, but equally it might not have been her. It might have been Nina, wanting comfort. It might have been Carina, come to have him just the once before they parted, possibly for ever.

Or it might have been Helena.

He did not recognise the feel of this woman, and he didn't care other than to take comfort from the womanly presence beside him, which felt oddly archetypal, though real and whole. And half waking he turned, rested his forehead against her shoulder and slept on. She felt like Hermione now, he thought - firm, toned - but smelled of Helena, softer, more willowy in repose, yet in her silence could still have been Nina, or Carina.

And back into the dream he followed each of these stories into the midst of a future life, picked them up from the morning after and projected them far into the future. Carina, he would go with to Ireland, maybe Europe eventually, provide for her a quiet, uncomplaining companion while she scaled her intellectual mountains and wrote books only a handful of academics would ever read. Or maybe they could just tour Europe on their Irish passports, as newly appointed Irish people, at least while Europe was there. She would never discover the source or the cure of our increasing madness, but she would be animated by the search.

Nina? Oh, she was a possibility, for sure, he thought. Pretty woman like that, strong and no-nonsense. She might be his housekeeper, except she'd done with all of that, she said. Still, he might get to know her that way first, let her tend his house by day and his wants by night, before she eventually demanded a bigger share of him. And yes, he'd be willing. It was above all, a plausible fantasy. Squinty Mulligan! The old fool.

She might have saved him.

As for Helena? What would that be like? Wild nights for sure, and by day jumping to her sharp tongue, and her impatience that he could sit mending little watches when he should be taking out the bins and fixing broken things about the house. He'd have to learn how to shout back, and not mean it, or she'd wipe the floor with him. But the thought of it was still more than a little exciting, because she was dignified, and immensely strong and worthy of his service, she being the undisputed Queen of Carrickbar.

And in the dream it didn't matter a damn. Any of it. It was like his choice of watch each day, each fulfilling a need for the moment, and the need changing with the tides of his psyche. And the point was,... *the point was*,... not the wearing of the watch but the internal details of each one and how with patience and care and gentleness, they could be kept running, ticking along, and time passing. And he possessed none of them. Some he favoured more than others, but all were merely stewarded, restored, nurtured, rescued from an unknown past, respectfully handled, and passed forward into the future.

So it was with his women. He loved them all, feared them all, feared for them all, and desired above all to be loved by them. But equally, in the dreaming at least, he was minded to let them all go, or rather let go of the notion he could possess any of them, or that they could possess him, or that he could take pleasure in allowing the possession of himself,...

By them.

And then it was dawn, and the woman had gone, indeed had perhaps not been there at all, and he might have convinced himself of that fact except for the warm hollow beside him.

Hermione?

The door swished open and she came in with fresh tea, bringing with her the scent of the shower.

"Mr Finn?"

"Nina?"

"I'm sorry, Mr Finn, it was a mistake."

Nina?

"A mistake?"

"I should have gone with him to the hospital," she said. "I've been awake all night thinking about it, thinking about him lying there."

But Finn had already forgotten Squinty, a man with a chunk out of his arse, and his insanely dangerous dog lying dead in a pool of blood. He took a breath, took a while to catch up. For one awkward moment

there he thought he might actually have spent the night with Nina.

It had been Hermione then? Surely he had not dreamed her! He tried to piece it all together: yes, it had been Hermione who had come home last night, late, found him asleep, decided not to disturb him in the usual way, then left quietly again in the morning to open up the Sea View.

But all without saying a word?

And is it true, she had smelled of Helena?

Imagination, Finn!

"Em,... are you sure about this, Nina?"

He had a memory of lying with his forehead against the cool of Hermione's shoulder, felt the coolness soothing him in waves with each long, slow breath, felt too the stillness in her, the humming of the machinery as she pondered the thing that was beyond him, beyond them, now.

"It is a lot to ask," said Nina.

"You want to go see him?"

She was surprised he could intuit it, looked away embarrassed. "You don't want to take me. Why would you? I understand."

"Of course I'll take you. I was only thinking, is it not more a question of,... I mean,... is it the *right* thing to do?"

"I think it is right."

"Okay then. Let's go."

But,...

The 'but' was longer in coming. They were in the car, in fact, still early, heading back to Lancaster, to the hospital. Finn had wanted to run down to the Sea View, to perhaps see Carina before she left for home. There'd been something odd in the way they'd parted last night - those chips, aromatic and salty on the sea breeze and the thin slit of moon as they'd talked, like a last farewell.

He'd texted but she'd yet to reply. And he wanted to see Hermione, but had felt the tide ebbing there as well and decided not to resist, to go instead with Nina, and for no other reason than she was a person who needed him. And, unlike Hermione and Helena, her needs were tangible, even if they made no sense to him at all.

"But Nina,..."

"I can't help it, Mr. Finn."

"You can catch a fast train from Lancaster. You could be in London this afternoon. You could,... escape,..."

"And then what?"

"I don't know. But you're a free person, and you're better off away from Mulligan and those creeps who introduced you to him. The future is in some other part of Europe now. Not here. Not any more. All there is here is exploitation. And everybody in charge is a money-befuddled crook looking to enslave the rest of us, starting with the most vulnerable, and working their way up as high as they can. That's how we have to think now."

"Is it true we will have to register as foreigners soon?"

"I don't know. I heard something about that, but,..."

"Some have been getting letters already, telling them to leave, even though they are married to English people. They say it was a mistake now, sending these letters, but surely this shows that somewhere in the machinery of state there is such a letter waiting to be sent."

"I read about that, yes,... I don't know, Nina. But why would you want to stay? We've not exactly kept you safe, have we?"

"Yes, yes,... all of this is true. And you are right. And maybe I shall go, soon. But things are not so good at home, or I would not have come here in the first place. But whatever I do, first I must apologise to him. Set things right. Then I shall decide."

"Apologise for what?"

"I thought he was going to molest me,... but now I think he was not. I

think he was just, flirting. It was an accident, Mr Finn."

Finn doubted Mulligan's ability to flirt at all. Flirting took a certain degree of subtlety and humour. Mulligan's style was more to whip his dick out, force a girl to her knees and tell her to suck on it. "But,... he won't care. You heard how he spoke to you yesterday."

"He was hurt. He did not know what he was saying. And John is always like that, always rough talking. But he is a child and he never means it. I know what he means. I've seen it. And he means well if only we would let him."

That Nina was blind to Mulligan's shortcomings was obvious, and the reason she was blind was also becoming obvious. She was in love with him, and she did not want to kill that feeling by questioning it, by over-thinking it, by weighing it against her other options. It was very, very simple and all things followed from that. It was simply her nature to be loving. Finn feared for her, but also envied her that clarity, that courageous conviction in the sheer rightness of it.

"You told me he meant to keep your passport from you. He's a bad man."

"I don't know if that was truly what he intended, or if he meant it as a surprise for me, and maybe to soften me a little."

"But he smuggles drugs and goodness knows what else. That's a long time in prison when they catch up with him, and they will. And then they'll want to know how much you knew."

"He will stop all of that now. I am sure of it."

"Men like Squinty can't stop. He was brought up on it. It's in his blood."

"Clearly you are against him, Mr Finn. Please,... tell me, what did he do to your girlfriend?"

"I doesn't matter,..."

He wondered abut telling her, but Mulligan would only deny it, and this thing with Nina, it was not his fight, not his business, and his irritation, his fear for Nina seemed rooted more in something within himself, in his own inability to disregard the facts of his life and simply follow his heart. Always, always, he had to think about it. And thinking about it

ruined it. Thinking about it had always suggested to him doubt, and,...

If in doubt don't do it, Finn.

I love you.

Delete.

Not once had he simply let the current take him. And why? Because there was no current to his life; it was a life becalmed in a spreadsheet of sterility. He had come to Carrickbar to find it, to step back into the stream of something, let himself be carried away by the sheer irrational exuberance of it, but risked now creating only the same cowardly stagnation, a life hemmed in by questions and spurious reasons why not. He feared he'd already missed his chance with Hermione, missed it because not once had he told her he loved her.

"Don't listen to me," he said. "What do I know anyway? Do what you feel is right. I'll help you in any way I can."

Nina smiled. "And afterwards you will tell me you told me so?"

"Probably, since we're friends now and friends are allowed to do that. But I'm curious; what do you want? You want to be with him? Marry him?"

"I don't know, Mr. Finn. All of that is a long way off, certainly, even if it's possible. Right now I just want to see him, and hold his hand a little. Then I will go back to his house and clean up the mess. Then I will think about what to do for myself."

"But it's his mess. Let him clear it up."

"Billy will stink by then. It's not right."

"I don't understand."

Nina shook her head slowly, smiled, a little embarrassed. He was a nice guy, this Mr Finn, you know,... nice they could be friends, but he was definitely leaking somewhere. In another life she would help him, nurture him. In this one she could not. That was another woman's problem. "I am unable to explain."

But it was okay, Finn understood things well enough. Nina's love for

Squinty Mulligan was about as close as it came to the truth, and it shamed both him and Mulligan - Mulligan for not seeing it and appreciating it, and Finn for seeing it yet still being unable to believe in it, and more,... do anything about it.

Chapter Eighty Seven

Hermione looks up as the door jingles announcing the arrival of another customer on an already busy afternoon. Sometimes she looks back with fondness to the early days of the cafe when she might have gone days without a single customer, days when she counted every penny, for at least then there were moments when she might catch her breath and gaze out to sea. Now she had to run to keep up, and her few local, loyal regulars were being forced out of the one-time steamy intimacy of the place by a long line of itinerant and wealthy incomers. The Sea View Cafe was becoming,... ugh! Gentrified!

More day tourists is it?

No, it's Finn.

He looks different, she thinks. He's pale, tired and it fills her with a sudden shock of longing. She wants to rest him, feed him soup, except she's not sure she can, not sure she's the right girl for him any more because he lied, and because she slept with him last night, and he said nothing, and all right, so what if her head is so far away from where it should be none of this is reasonable, but still, it's how she feels - anxious and conflicted beyond all reconciliation.

Wait,... Finn lied, Hermione?

Yes, he fucking lied. All right?

You're forgetting you slept with Helena?

Anica is filling her in on events at the garage yesterday, but she's only half listening - Finn and Carina to the rescue of the mysterious and rarely seen Nina - by the sounds of it another woman unambiguously humiliated and abused by Squinty Mulligan.

There had been an ambulance, and policemen, and rumours of Mulligan with a chunk bitten from his arse - this latter detail had by turns made her laugh then wince, but she is learning to hold back her pity where Mulligan is concerned, this the man who pointed a gun at Helena and expected Hermione to suck his dick. And then there was Carina's early morning flight, following a summons to a meeting regarding her future - unless of course she and Finn had merely argued.

Over sex.

Is he okay?

No, not Squinty, damn him - Finn!

Oh, he's a difficult man to read, this one. Sweet. Complex. Too many women in his life right now for sure. But more to the point, he's still a mystery, and not altogether trustworthy - to whit: a pair of knickers on the bathroom floor this morning, not Hermione's, so whose?

His?

No, Finn has no kinks in that direction. Of this she is certain, having already intuited the kinks he does posses, and explored them with him. Her favourite is the way he likes to be ridden slowly, and with only a gentle pressure, with her looking down upon him, somewhat stern, and how under those circumstances he can be made to come by pausing and merely smiling at him and applying the lightest rhythmic pressure with her pelvic muscles. As a lover Mr Finn Fancypants Finucane is a man of great and ever so satisfying subtlety.

They were Carina's then.

What?

The knickers!

Had to be. I mean, who else?

So, there you are: they'd been at it yesterday, while she and Helena had been,... what? shopping? All right, so she and Helena had been at it as well, and she's in no position to be upset by his apparent infidelity, yet she is - *upset.* I mean,... at least she'd asked permission first to go with Helena.

And do you realise how perverted that sounds, Hermione?

Okay, but the curious thing is while one part of her is feeling paradoxically betrayed another part is relieved, is indeed pleased for him and she understands why he would do it - with a woman like Carina, clearly so much more his *type.* They must have some sort of history*, dammit.* I mean why else would she come all this way, in spite of everything she'd said to the contrary, if it had not been to seduce

him?

Not sure how it is between us, exactly, Hermione.

Bitch.

A simpler story. That's what Helena had said. How did she put it? Finn goes with Carina, she goes with Helena, all four of them pairing off into a simpler happy ever after. Except Helena didn't want that, would not permit it, she'd said. Carina might have saved Finn's life, but she could not make him happy.

Only Hermione could do that,... and Helena. Whether Finn liked it or not.

Cheap, pink, dainty - the knickers, like a teenager's, she'd thought, like something Anica would wear. Surprising that. She'd taken Carina for more sophistication in the undergarment department, something more suited to that expansive roll of the hips, more your fifty quid a pair bracket, not five for a tenner. And they'd been getting on so well, and Hermione had TRUSTED her.

Oh, Finn!

It feels like she hasn't seen him for ages, not withstanding the fact they slept the most part of the night together. But what it is, she realises, is the fact that it's another lifetime now. This is a time begun after Helena, while the time before is so long ago it rises only as vague memories.

She'd showered at the hotel, then talked late into the night with Helena - more madness, Helena mesmerising her with that same old spell, convincing her by degrees of the naturalness, the rightness and the downright necessity of this three way madness, even though Hermione had told her over and over that none of it was necessary, that Helena was going to live beyond the autumn. But Helena needed her story, and in the end Hermione had been happy to enter into it.

And thus finally her day had ended still warm from a parting embrace, imagining herself smelling of Helena's perfume now, then creeping back to his bed, already like a cheating wife, like his Kathleen. And there, she had slipped straight in beside him, glad to plunge into the safe and certain heat of him, bathe herself back to normality, all the while holding herself stiffly aside, inside at least, out of a shame that was not really shame, more a strange confusion of emotion.

What if he'd wanted to make love? What if he'd expected *her* to want to make love - I mean, she usually did, right? And there she was still bruised and sore from Helena! Had he felt that reluctance, she wondered? Had he sensed all of what was inside of her? Is that why she had crept out again in the morning, like after a one night stand, without waking him, for fear of seeing it in his eyes, that big question mark, and having to explain how she found herself inexplicably in love with Helena as well as with him?

So, yes, she'd felt guilty about all of that, that is until seeing the knickers on the bathroom floor. And this had caused her thoughts to turn to other things, like,..

What the f?...

Carina must have been in a daze to have left them behind.

So,... phone call from the dawn-lit cafe this morning, to a sleepy Helena, still in bed:

What's he up to Helena?

Relax, Hermione,... is not what you are thinking, Finn would not do that.

You said he would.

What? When do I say this?

Yesterday - 'you hope is all they do,' you said, meaning you thought they might.

There was a pause while Helena thought about this. Why can no one interpret her contrariness as mere provocation? Why must she be taken so literally all the time?

There is another explanation, Hermione. And I will find out what it is.

So there's Finn, same as usual, yet nothing's the same any more; her feelings, her circumstances, the world, even the damned sunshine looks a different colour today.

How do you feel now, Hermione, when you look at him?

Well, she feels something deeply all right, wants him as much as ever, maybe even more, now she thinks she's lost him to Carina, wants him to want her, maybe even more. And she would have felt confident, empowered in the wanting of him and in the knowledge of his wanting her, had it not been for her lying for a time blissfully in Helena's arms, and, yes, all right, that pair of knickers on the bathroom floor.

Serves her right. Her and Helena, both. I mean tit for tat and all that, and Carina getting the last laugh, but it still doesn't make sense.

Not Finn. Bryan maybe. But not Finn.

Too late for speculation, Minny.

Even though he's standing right there as if butter wouldn't melt, he's gone, girl.

Her heart aches.

Oh,... Finn.

"So, what can I get you darlin'?"

He looks innocent enough, doesn't he, not like someone cheating, not like someone blown away after making love with a woman he's known half his life, and who maybe *saved* his life. Also, Carina is a little nearer his own age, so perhaps they are better suited. She's also smart, not like Hermione.

No,... Carina would ruin him.

Only Hermione really understands him, understands what he wants, what he needs. Helena understands him too, a little, but she'd destroy him as well without Hermione to check her, to make her ease back on the pedal a bit. With Hermione around Helena and Finn would be perfect.

What?

Never mind.

He still has the same sad eyes, the same expression of a man who's been looking for something for so long he's forgotten what it is, and all

there's left of him now is this look of bemused acceptance that he'll never find it. And she might have been it - this thing he was looking for. Or least she might have persuaded him of it, once. But not any more.

Trust me, she'd said.

"Em, Americano please. Black. No sugar."

"Should know that by now. Same old Finn, eh?"

They laugh, but there's something nervous in it, something anxious, the mutual awareness of a void that will need careful filling, even if they're to remain friends. But he seems at least willing. Yes, she thinks: friends at least, he will allow. Strange, he does not have those cheating eyes. She used to be able to tell when Bryan was at it behind her back. Finn just looks the same: perplexed. But whatever the truth of the matter, it's as well Carina's moved out because she'll probably be needing her own bed tonight. How often does that happen, she wonders - lovers cheating on each other, at the same time?

Anica looks coy, aware of more than anyone gives her credit for and mainly because Carina has made a friend of her, as is her way, and answered all her questions with an honesty Anica had found as refreshing as she'd found it enlightening. "Hiya Finn."

"Hi Annie."

"Sorry Carina is gone. It's been fun with her around. I hope they do not fire her. But I also hope they do because then she might come back."

"I don't think she cares if they fire her or not, Annie."

And Hermione's wondering - *oh, and why not?* "I'll bring it over," she says.

"Thanks."

So, mid afternoon and the Sea View is busy with bikers and pensioners. Hermione's heart feels jumpity, her nails bitten to rags, wanting everyone to go then she can sit down with him and get the measure of this new *thing.* But it's impossible. They'll not be able to talk until after closing time and that's hours away and by then she'll be shattered and smelling of the griddle.

She has made love with Helena!

Fact.

Finn has made love with Carina.

Fact?

No, Minnie, at the moment that's a suspicion which, on balance, puts him a little higher up the innocence stakes than you!

She's thinking back on it now, on the feel of Helena's skin, the movement of her body, and the tender way she'd come, and the expert and stunning way Helena had turned the tables and made Hermione come, again and again. And she's thinking how much she wanted it then,... and how much she wants it again, and wait a minute,... why is she thinking of this now, when she's looking at Finn?

The realisation escapes her, accompanied by a gasp of steam from the coffee machine, the feeling she wants Finn to experience it too, what she'd had,... what Helena had made her feel. I mean,... she'd really love to see the look on his face when Helena was doing *that* to him,...

What? I do? No way!

Oh, but I'm afraid you do, Hermione.

And the reason you're angry with him is that he's blown the chance of going all the way with the two of you,... by sleeping with Carina.

"You all right, Minnie?"

Her brow is speckled. She wipes it with the back of her hand. "Em,... no,.. actually. Hot. A bit hot."

"Yes, so busy in here this afternoon. We should open a window you think?"

"No, I'll be all right, darlin'. You take Finn his coffee."

"For sure, but tell me, Mrs Aynslea is well?"

Hermione tries to reel in the sharpness of her reply, but too late: "Why

do you ask?"

Anica is stung, then suspicious. "Oh,... no reason. She seems so much easier with me now. So much nicer. I am no longer afraid of her, Minnie."

"We should always be afraid of Helena, Annie."

Strange thing to say.

Something odd going on between Hermione and Helena? I mean, it's obvious. But Hermione and Helena? Really? "But why?"

Hermione wanted to say Helena was like a Genie. Open the bottle and out she pops,... poof! Like that! And there she is, all big and beautiful, and she has a way of finding out real quick what it is we want, then making sure we get it. And Hermione is suddenly remembering those genie stories didn't always end well, and it's like she's getting it finally, only twenty years too late for her school essays. Genies and their wishes are about knowing the difference between what you want, and what's good for you.

"Oh,... no reason. Take no notice of me. She makes me a bit anxious, that's all." She brightens. "So, how you and Kyle gettin' on?"

Anica becomes serious, her face darkening. "I think he would like to be with me."

"I think so too, darlin'. But why so glum? I'm sure it'll be fine. Helena likes you, really. She's just a funny way of showin' it. Trust me."

"Oh, Minnie, we both know it is only a matter of time before I am no longer welcome here."

"Don't be daft, you're always welcome. You stay with me as long as you like. This is your home, Annie."

"I did not mean like that. Minnie you are so kind, but,... it is the authorities who will make me unwelcome."

"Oh,... we'll sort that out. You're workin', long term, we'll,... we'll get you a permit, a visa or,... somethin'. There'll be a process. Can't just send you home, can they?"

"I don't know. It's strange. Me and Nina, we must now fear deportation. Mrs Aynslea too perhaps."

"Helena? Why would she?"

"She is not living with her husband. If she is not a citizen,... I don't know, maybe she will have to leave too. And from what you say, unlike me and Nina, she does not have a home to go back to."

"But she's,... settled. Got permanent leave to remain. Told me so herself."

"But everything is changing. Nothing is the same, rules are rewritten every day now, and it seems even if you are English born, you cannot trust in your own identity any more, no matter who you think you are."

Amen to that, Anica.

Chapter Eighty Eight

Finn was still wondering if he had lost Hermione to Helena, or if he was over-thinking the whole thing, as usual. Yet lurking within the possibility of his over-thinking, and whatever the truth of their relationship now, was the awkward fact of his arousal at the thought of Hermione and Helena together - not so much the thought of them actually, *doing it,* which in truth he found slightly embarrassing, as if intruding upon someone else's private moment; it was more thought of them simply *together,* to the extent that the most erotic thing he could imagine right now was simply sharing a table with them, of them dressed up and perfumed and beautiful, and him looking up and seeing both of them looking back at him with Mona Lisa smiles.

It sent a shiver up his spine. What the hell was he supposed to do with that?

Meanwhile, he watched her.

Hermione ran a cafe, an oasis on the edge of an England he no longer knew and had even contemplated leaving. Nina and Anica would eventually have to leave or risk prison, fines, even forcible removal by bruisers wearing body armour piling out the back of big vans. Yet only months ago they had been fellow Europeans,... friends. The zeitgeist was oppressive, intolerant of all things foreign now, intolerant of change and he did not like it. It made him afraid.

What's true is what changes, and what cannot change is no longer true. Carina had once said that, and it he knew it was right, that the world he lived in now was not true. It was calcifying.

Hermione ran it well, the cafe, because it was all that was left for her to do in the mean time, and she was doing the best she could, and he wanted her to know that if no one else saw the magnificence in that, he saw it, bore witness to it, and that he loved her for it.

Too late for that word now, Finn.

What word?

Love.

Ah,...

And Helena? Proud survivor, struggling for dignity, struggling against loneliness, exiled from her homeland, from her youth, and even now from her marriage. It moved him to watch her, to think of her - moved him at times close to tears, had him aching every time he saw her, aching that if only he could be twice the man he was he might actually be,...

What Finn? What might you be?

Of some use to her, *dammit!*

There was no escaping it: he loved Helena too, always had, same way as he loved Hermione, and just as deep. The only difference was they'd never made love. He'd thought about it, of course he did, all the time, and maybe that's why he could never be comfortable around her - he was embarrassed by his thoughts.

Lionel arrived amid the melee, ordered tea from the counter, but looked all the while a little overwhelmed, looked as if he might just as soon turn around and go back out, that is until he spied Finn waving him over to share his table. The two sat down together, glad for the company, and the distraction from other things.

"Ah, good man, Finn. Never seen the place look so busy."

"No one can resist Hermione's charms these days, Lionel."

"True. Anica's quite the entertainer as well, and her cakes are delightful."

"No arguments there."

Simple things:

Charm.

Cakes.

Beautiful women.

Lionel took a thoughtful sip of his tea, licked his lips and prepared to gossip. "Heard about all that shenanigans at the garage yesterday. How is Mulligan, do you know?"

"Oh, he'll mend, but the dog made a mess of him. Lucky he didn't bleed to death. Nina slit its throat with a vegetable knife then got a tourniquet on him. Lucky she wasn't killed as well."

"Lord. Gutsy lady. Is she,... all right?"

"Yes,... though it's hard to know what's going on inside her head. She's a tough one, gutsy, like you say, but she must be shaken by it all the same. Probably saved his life - not that he'll appreciate it. Treats her like dirt, and she still worships the ground he walks on. I just don't get it, Lionel."

"Familiar story, Finn. Some girls are drawn to wrong-uns. Fact of life. They can't help it. It's a mystery, old boy. Think they can tame them with kindness perhaps, I don't know, make better men of them or something."

"Does it ever work though, taming a beast like Mulligan, I mean with kindness?"

"Not in any of the books I've written for sure, but then I'm a bit of a pessimist when it comes to the role of alpha males in polite society. You're worried about her?"

"Yes,... you know what Mulligan's like. And you know about his,... smuggling and all that?"

"Worst kept secret in Carrickbar, old boy. He's not the only one,... smuggling. Police are always watching the harbour these days. Can't believe he's got away with it for as long as he has."

"Police are watching the harbour?"

"Oh, yes - well, off and on, when they can afford the time, I suppose - I rather get the impression they're a bit thinly stretched these days - smugglers are running rings around them. So, what do you know about her, this Nina?"

"Not much. She's a good sort, came to work the fields but got herself duped into the employ of some shady gangster types, and now she's with Mulligan, loaned out to him as a housekeeper or something - sounds complicated, and dangerous, for both of them. Like this modern slavery that they talk about nowadays. He's too stupid to realise what's going on, but she's got brains and knows the mess she's

in, and,... well,... I'm sure she must be pretty scared."

"Bottom line of capitalism, old boy. Slavery at the hands of the morally bankrupt. You don't suppose she's trying to protect him, do you?"

"I wouldn't be surprised. She's clearly in love with him, and she'll only wake up from that when he really hurts her. But even that's better than getting dragged down with Mulligan when everything catches up with him."

"Well, the best we can do is let her know she has alternatives, eh?"

"Alternatives?"

"Other friends, old boy. Get her up to the Sea View. The girls here will look after her. Helena too will have something to say about it, I'm sure. Sounds like she's the only person Mulligan's afraid of, and I don't blame him. I believe she knocked the wind out of him the other night."

"You heard about that?"

"It's all over town, Finn. Everybody's talking about it. Mulligan won't be able to show his face in the King James again for shame."

"But,... how do people find out about these things?"

"It's a mystery old boy."

"Look, Lionel,... you're a,... a man with his ear to the ground."

"A frightful gossip you mean?"

"Possibly. But what's the consensus regarding Helena? I mean what do people *think* of her?"

"Queen of Carrickbar, old boy. Simple as that."

"But does that mean they respect her, or are they just laughing at her?"

"I'm sure there are some who pull faces behind her back, but no one who's met her has failed to be impressed and want to move heaven and earth to do what she asks them. Royalty isn't something that's bought, or aspired to Finn. It's something you're born with."

They sat a while in silence then, Finn casting furtive glances towards Hermione. She caught him, winked at him, raising his spirits a notch. All was not lost then; they were at least still flirting.

"So, tell me,... how's the work going, Lionel?"

"Work, Finn?"

"You fiction, your romances."

"Oh,... plodding on. Just a bit of fun though at the end of the day. It's not like I'm up against any publishers deadlines is it?"

"I suppose not. What form do they take? Boy meets girl, obstacles to love, happy ever after stuff? Things like that?"

"You make it sound a little trite, but generally, yes. We all enjoy a good love story."

"I suppose so. Would you ever consider anything more adventurous?"

"Racy you mean?"

"Em,.. possibly."

"Bonkbuster? That sort of thing? A bit passe these days. Not really my cup of tea anyway."

"Well, Bonkbuster, no. How about,... I mean just for example,... a Lesbian romance?"

Lionel spluttered obligingly on his tea. Hermione, watching, wondered what the joke was. Finn was pretty sure this was not a safe topic of conversation to be having with such a consummate gossip, but he assured himself if he kept things vague, he might learn something, without giving too much away.

"Not unless I wanted to make myself sound completely ridiculous, Finn. I think a man is best sticking to what he knows. A woman is mystery enough to us without delving into the mysteries *between* women as well. But I suppose,.. well,... love is love, isn't it? It's just the sex that's different. The mechanics of it and all that, eh? But,.. why do you ask?"

Love is love.

But is that merely the permission to bonk kind of love, Lionel?

You can answer that one yourself by now Finn, surely? Think of the kind of sweet unadulterated love one person has for another, the kind of love one is willing to act upon at the expense of all other things, including, and perhaps especially, reason. Remember Nina? That's really *love*. And we all have it in us to love that way, just as we all have it in us to subject love to varying degrees of death.

I love you.

Delete.

"Sorry, Lionel. Don't know why I asked. Forgive me. Change of subject - did you never think of marrying again?"

"Never crossed my mind, old boy. I'm perfectly content living the life of a singleton now. What about you?"

"Still married, remember?"

"But supposing,..."

"Is that a roundabout way of asking about me and Hermione?"

Lionel smiled his matchmaker smile, nodded. "You seem to have been getting on well."

"Oh,... fine, thanks."

Lionel waited for Finn to go on, but it seemed that's all he was prepared to say on the matter, and of course his guardedness had Lionel wondering what the problem was. "Ah, like that is it?"

"No, seriously,... we're fine."

"I wouldn't worry. All relationships have their ups and downs. I'm sure things will, em,.. blow over."

"But everything's just fine,... anyway,...getting back to your writing, how about a polyamorous three-way?"

What? Are you nuts, Finn?

No, let's test this one out on Lionel,... keeping it all hypothetical of course,...

Lionel noted the switch of subject, looked bemused, shook his head. "I'd have no idea where to start with that one I'm afraid. Not even sure I understand the term."

"Me neither."

"I'd have to look it up."

"Already done that - not a good idea. Scares the pants off me."

"Finn, old man,... you're not two timing Hermione, are you? Is that what you're saying?"

"Absolutely not."

"I mean,... Helena's a damned good looking woman and somewhat,.. well,... magnetic,.. and I wouldn't blame you falling for her, but,... and I speak to you as a friend, not some fuddy duddy old timer who should know better than to go poking his nose in where it's not wanted. You must be straight with Hermione. She's a dear girl and I won't see her hurt for anything. In a situation like this a man can have one woman or the other, not both, *and preferably it should be Hermione*."

"Like I said, I'm not two timing Hermione."

Lionel looked aside while he thought about it. "Well,... that's fine, and I apologise for the misunderstanding."

"You're clearly very fond of her yourself."

"Well,... she was a bit,... fragile when she first moved to Carrickbar. She needed a,... friend, and well, perhaps I needed a daughter too. You must forgive my protectiveness."

"Not at all. I'm pleased she has someone like you looking out for her."

Lionel thought some more about what Finn has said, and then about what he wasn't saying. *Polyamory?* It was more than a casual remark, surely? Yet he couldn't fathom it, decided not to probe too much for

fear of getting the wrong idea again and making a fool of himself, indeed felt it best to close the subject and move on. "Em,... well,... like I said, I'm sure things will work out between the two of you."

But Finn was feeling reckless now, and wanted to shake some pearls of wisdom from Lionel, both as a man who had lived a long time, and as a writer who had clearly pondered long upon the many and varied pathways of love. And they were of course safe, still talking in this purely hypothetical way. "Yes, yes. I'm sure you're right. But just supposing a man was in that position, you know, two women, and a man. They both want him and he wants them, and they want each other, and all three know the score. How would it work,... I mean emotionally. Where would be the happy ending, in that?"

"In an,... em,.. three-way thing?... *menage a trois*, I think we used to call it in the olden days,.. heavens,... it's rather a Bohemian scenario, but it does happen, even in so called polite society, just... well not very often, and usually in ways that are deniable."

"Deniable?"

"You know? Pretending things are one way when actually they're another,.. the other woman is the housekeeper, or the cousin or something. A question of how one is introduced, Finn."

"Sounds a bit,... Victorian though. Surely things can be a bit more open nowadays?"

Lionel spread his fingers upon the table, contemplated the lines on the back of his hands as if working out the plot of Finn's life - I mean we *were* talking about Finn here, weren't we? And by inference Helena and Hermione. Crikey, he'd not seen that one coming, though where Helena was concerned he should perhaps not be surprised by anything!

He shook his head, defeated. "I can understand the fascination in exploring such a thing, I mean as a writer. But it smacks of decadence, Finn. We get so much above ourselves, think ourselves so sophisticated these days, don't we, the normal rules don't apply to us?"

"Rules?"

"Of love. But we're not at all sophisticated. I don't see how anyone in such a relationship as you describe can really be in love with anyone

but themselves."

Finn felt chastened by that. "I see your point."

Yes,... he really saw it, saw how Lionel might be right, except he really did love Hermione and Helena, and though he was coming round now to accepting himself a little more for what he was, he still wasn't exactly the Narcissistic type. Perhaps it was that bang on the head, but whatever had been dislodged by it was not for settling back into its old, comfortable position.

"Love is,... going home, Finn."

"Home?"

"Yes,.. you know? The world can be a big and lonely place, impossible for a man to make his home anywhere. Everything so strange and cold and alien. And then he falls in love, and wherever he finds love, that's where his heart returns to at the end of each day. But a man's heart can't be split in two, just like he can't be in two places at the same time."

"Okay."

"Sometimes, no matter how a writer twists and turns, the happy ending eludes him, and if he goes after it at any price he lets the reader down with his deceit. Under those circumstances the tragic ending is the more appropriate, but being a romantic myself, I would sooner give up on a story than see it end badly."

"The guy would be better walking away, you mean? Give up on the,... em,... the women. Hurt them? And it *would* hurt them, Lionel. It would also hurt him."

"We're still discussing hypotheticals, I take it?"

"Absolutely."

"Well,.. it does sound rather brutal. Sounds also as if the stage is already set for it."

"Once he starts to think along those lines you mean,... tragedy is inevitable?"

"Well, I didn't say that, exactly, but yes, and yet,...."

"And yet?"

"Well,... two women, Finn? Think of it! Two wives? I know in some cultures its perfectly acceptable, and maybe there's some mileage in exploring how that works. But from my own experience, hell, is a man even built for such a thing? Forget the bedroom stuff, though I imagine that would be quite a giggle at first, it's the other stuff you need to think about, like whose turn it is to put the bins out, and what happens round the tea table after a long day and all three are tired and ratty and the washing up still needs doing. That's where it would be really interesting, that's where it would stand or fall. And as a writer that's where I would like to be, sitting around that table, taking notes."

He drained his tea and stood, made ready to leave. "Look old boy, I'm not sure exactly what it is we've been talking about, and if I'm wrong you must forgive me, but they're both good women, and the best we can do is trust in that, eh? But please,... just,... be damned careful."

"Careful, Lionel?"

"It would be a brave man who crossed Helena, by accident or design. And lovers are apt to be a little,.. accident prone, are they not?"

"True."

Lionel gave a nod, patted Finn on the shoulder, though whether it was out of sympathy or to stiffen him up, Finn could not tell. "Look, come up and see me, eh? We'll have dinner again. You clearly need someone to talk to who isn't a woman. A glass of whiskey and a game of chess. Talk of other things. Anything but women. How does that sound?"

It sounded quite good, actually. "Thanks, I'll do that."

"And build that campsite. A man needs a project far more than he need a woman."

"Campsite?" Finn had completely forgotten the campsite. "Yes, I'll do that."

Hermione looked at Finn as Lionel left, mouthed the word: "Okay?" a question mark in her raised eyebrow.

He nodded, thumbs up. He was telling her he was fine, while his face was telling her something else. She came over to collect the empty cups, trying to read him in more detail, instead imagined him pumping his loins into Carina.

"So,... refill darlin'?"

"Em, no thanks. I'd best get off."

He looked about set to run, as if afraid of her. He'd done that before once, run all the way back to Aylesbury and Helena had to fetch him back. She dropped a hand onto his arm as if to stop him. "You worryin' bout Carina?"

"Yes,... in spite of what she says to the contrary it really would be the end for her if she was struck off."

He didn't sound like the deceitful lover either - same old Finn so far as Carina was concerned. "Look, why not come round the cafe tonight? 'bout eight? I'll cook us somethin' special. We can sit out in the tea garden. It'll be lovely. And we can talk."

"Talk, yes. We do need to talk, Hermione."

Was there a hint of something in his voice? a prelude to letting her down, letting her go? She felt a flutter of panic. "Things are so crazy, in't they? But it'll be fine. Trust me, Finn. You'll see."

"You don't need to keep saying that, you know? I *do* trust you."

Okay, he trusted her. That wasn't so bad then. More fool him. I mean how far did he trust her with Helena? "Okay, darlin'."

"And whatever happens," he said, "I want you to know that I love you. And that nothing will ever change that."

"Love me?"

"Yes."

He'd said it!

Did you hear that, Hermione?

He loves you!

She felt the revelation of it like a warm swelling in her breast, felt it run to ground through her legs, except,... he'd said it like a lover about to depart. *Whatever happens,* he'd said. That meant he was contemplating something bad, didn't it? because if it was something good he wouldn't need to say *whatever happens*, would he? The thought left her suddenly tearful and cold, and she didn't care if he'd slept with Carina, and she was about to blurt it out. And she hated that she'd slept with Helena, hated that she wanted to sleep with her again. And how could any of that make any of this,... okay?

Okay?

"I love you too," she said. "So,... see you tonight then?" She braced herself for the hesitation, for the faint rebuff, that maybe he'd be there, but not entirely in person.

"Sure, see you tonight. Eight o'clock. Sea View Cafe."

All right, that seemed positive enough. She'd tell him, then, tell him tonight, then try telling him again she loved him, then see how much he really loved her.

Chapter Eighty Nine

He was useless to them now, thought Nina - the muscle of his thigh torn so he could barely walk. She'd wept more than once at her part in all of that, though she knew Finn was right, and none of it was really her fault.

He'd be lucky if he he'd have the flexibility of limb to handle a boat again, or even drive a car. He'd be months healing, then maybe a whole year getting on his feet, and with the aid of a stick. He could do it, perhaps, with care and someone patient behind him to clear up the mess of his own impatience. But without that someone, he'd sink into anger, into bitterness, and his temper would make him a danger to everyone, especially to himself. There was no hiding it, no faking it. Was there? He was *definitely* useless to them, therefore free of them, though he'd not the sense to see it, or even wish it yet. Perhaps she could still persuade him of it, still make something of him, and of her time here?

Really Nina?

Finn would say why bother?

After all, she no longer needed Mulligan. Indeed the tables had been turned. He needed her, now, for who else was going to take care of him? And she liked that idea. It was also an advantage, the fact his reduced mobility rendered him a little safer to be around. Better a big dick like that is not carried on fast legs. Oh, why had she screamed? It wasn't as if she'd not seen a naked man before, and it was clear the towel had simply fallen from him by accident. It had just been the,...

Bigness of him.

Fuck.

He was huge!

All she'd wanted was to escape poverty, to follow opportunity and work hard. But instead of discovering opportunity, she had found vultures circling, growing fat off the flesh of the poor, the displaced, the ones on the margins of life. It was looking impossible to escape it, to become independent and respectable again. For a time, since coming to Carrickbar, she had thought it might be possible, if only she could solve the enigma of Squinty Mulligan. The skies here were more open,

the streets cleaner, the people not so frightening as in the cities. There had been moments when she'd felt she could breathe again.

By evening, she'd cleaned the kitchen, scrubbed away all trace of the drama, got someone to remove the dog, dispose of it, legally, properly. For expenses Squinty had given her a debit card and pin, peeled it casually from his wallet, one of many keys to the various murky funds he had sequestered, but she preferred to know nothing of that. And anyway, it was not for her own benefit, this money - just seeing to his mess.

In his absence she also explored the deeper layers of his house, not exactly looking for contraband - though she'd known he'd brought something home from sea yesterday - I mean other than the fish. But she was more interested in things that would give a clue to the man he was, or why he was the way he was, and why he was worth saving, because without loving him, he was not worth the sweat of it, and certainly not the tears. There had to be more to him than that big dick. Or was that in the end the only measure of him, that he was driven by it, a slave to his own pleasures and his own sense of self importance. Was he just a scoundrel and a fool? And if so what had happened to her own judgement that she could be drawn to such a thing?

There wasn't much by way of clues in the house - the closest she came up with was an old tin of family photographs. Among them she recognised him as a boy, looking subdued between stern faced parents. There were pictures of the garage in olden times, quaint looking motors queuing up for fuel. There was a perky, jaunty air about that period, she thought, lost times, a lost world of optimism and smiles, gone even before she was born. It would be the sixties, she supposed.

Of the more recent Squinty, she found his Bluebeard's cupboard in the workshop. Magazines? How quaint - she'd been sure all this stuff had moved online by now, but whatever,... it revealed an eclectic taste for the various ways of sexually humiliating women. Even this she could forgive him, because he was a man after all, though somewhat predictably old fashioned in his liking for garter-belts and stockings. The bondage themes did not particularly disturb her. There was nothing about him to suggest it went any further than glossy paged fancy - no actual ropes or chains, or other more elaborate forms of restraint among the drawers of his house.

Was it all simply like his gruff manner? a mask, an identity he had

constructed - the misogyny, the objectification of women, the reduction of them to a mere collection of holes? Surely she'd learned that she'd only to bark at him and it was all blown away, the little boy revealed, still subdued between stern parents. What was it in her that made her want to reach out her hand to him, draw him away from the pernicious darkness of their shadow, and this rather smelly old place, and back into the light?

Oh,.. Nina.

It made no sense. Of course it didn't. The truth is she was lost in the gap between the dream of true liberty and the reality. She was not a citizen of England, never would be at this rate, passport or not - not sure she wanted to be any more. She had dreamed of picking strawberries in the Kentish region, of saving money, of perhaps finding a nice flat in a provincial town. London was too expensive - divided between millionaires and slaves, and she did not want to be a slave any more. But there were other towns not so expensive or divided, where people were nicer, the gangsters fewer, and she could work in their restaurants, maybe one day open her own cafe, like the Sea View.

Like Hermione.

No money for the dreams of small people nowadays Nina!

But there must be!

Got to dream, haven't you?

But even such simple dreams as that seemed no longer realisable in a world turned to stone. It was just a question of who came for her first, the crooks, in order to press her back into some other nasty business, or the cops, come to throw her out of the country. She'd heard the established Poles and the Latvians were leaving, seeing their futures crumble, seeking fortunes elsewhere. The harvests of soft fruit would spoil this year for want of pickers, and there were no nurses in the hospitals - not even enough to refill Squinty's water-jug when he was thirsty.

She'd had to do that for him herself.

She had thought the British rather dour, void of emotion, the monied classes tending to a frightful snobbery and racism - a malaise they

tried to infect the masses with, through their newspapers. The lower class English she had found to possess an impersonal sort of kindness, also sentimentality and intemperance in equal measure, but she had never believed them to be truly stupid, until now.

Finn was kind, hard to judge the softness in him yet, the person underneath the politeness. John could also be kind, so long as he was first persuaded it was all right to be so.

She found the keys to the boat while she was cleaning up. They were in a corner of the kitchen floor, where they'd fallen. She knew they were the boat keys, because they were attached to a metal tag that said: "BOAT". They were sticky with blood, so she rinsed them under the tap, then wondered about the boat, wondered if it might tell her any more about the man. What was it called, this boat? She had only seen it from a distance, but what did it look like, up close? Was it a mess of rotten rope and paint-peeled wood. Or was it ship-shape with gleaming brass and a deeply lustrous varnish? Was the boat more indicative of the real Squinty Mulligan? Was he more like her: a sailor of dreams, resentful of being washed up in life?

You're romanticising, Nina.

That's what brought you to England in the first place.

And look how well that's gone for you..

The tide was out, the boat beached in mud, nothing but a few knots appearing to prevent it from being made off with, so the need for keys was a puzzle until she climbed aboard and spied the locker. She opened it, and found there what Squinty had been hiding, ran aground hard into the shallows of him, splintered her hull on the rocks beneath and felt a fool, felt betrayed by him, and by her feelings.

England was one of the few places in the world you were unlikely to be shot, except by a special policeman, and then by accident, and with apologies. She felt much safer in England on account of it. But here was Squinty, arming the crooks so they could hurt others, mostly one another no doubt, but there was always going to be collateral damage. She let the lid slam back in place, slid as far away as the confines of the boat would allow. Cigarettes indeed! Drugs - that was bad enough, every link in the chain stained with blood, but this? This was deep shit, and very, very serious.

It did not make her love him less, only now, in the span of a moment, she had moved on to wondering how she might survive the wreckage of it.

Chapter Ninety

Early evening and Finn was sunk at his desk, head in his hands, thinking about getting ready for seeing Hermione at the Sea View. It was a warm evening, the shadows on the street lengthening under an amber sun. The Summer months had certainly painted a smile on the face of Carrickbar, and ordinarily it would have been something to look forward to, sitting in the tea garden with her, a glass of wine, nice meal, walk along the beach. Maybe later they could have taken a shower together, made love. But instead he couldn't shake the feeling he was about to lose her.

I want to be with Helena, Finn.

Of all the things he imagined she might say to him, and no matter how much he didn't want her to say it, this was the one thing he would understand. Anything else would only confuse him. Anything else would be madness.

Helena wants to marry me.

Helena wants us both to marry her.

Helena wants, Helena wants.

Why did they listen to her? What was it about Helena Aynslea that made her so,... *magnetic*?

He'd come a long way, created another life out of nothing in just a few short months and it seemed to him he'd experienced more moments of joy in that time than he had in decades. He had begun to live again! Lionel was right about love, about home being wherever love was. And in his relationship with Hermione, he had begun to feel at last as if he was coming home. Was this nature's way then of telling him it was unsustainable, that it was not his home after all? Love could make any kind of life worthwhile, render one immune to the worst of situations, but it could also vanish overnight, remove the blinkers from your eyes and reveal the world once more as the same old exercise in futility.

Carrickbar, smiling or not, was nothing without Hermione.

Hermione would never leave, and he would never ask her to.

He thought of Carina's offer: him a kept man, a house-husband in a

Dublin suburb, spending his days in a shed in the back garden happily tinkering there with his little watches. If she'd known how attractive such a thing would sound to him, she would not have said it. But why not, for surely, Carina knew everything about him? It was the safe option, it was the keep Finn snug and warm option, which is why she'd told him to disregard it. She didn't want him safe and warm. She wanted him alive and kicking.

He would wear the Omega, he thought. It was important he stay focused, and calm, that he did not ruin everything by a careless slip of the tongue, that he did not say something he did not mean, or say it in such a way Hermione might misinterpret it as meaning something else entirely. The evening had to be perfect, and thus it had already become the perfectly set trap for the overly anxious lover.

Hermione was wrong. They did not have to talk at all. They could fast forward twenty years to the stage where they said nothing of any consequence to one another, least of all about this thing between her and Helena. He could just ignore it. Pretend it was not happening. But did he want to make the same mistake again? Did he want the mistake of dancing around the uncomfortable facts of his life, wishing they would go away, the uncomfortable fact, in this instance, being Helena? And how could he wish it, when he did not want Helena to go away - which brought him to another of the paradoxes of the Queen of Carrickbar: the fact of having to accept the presence of a thing that steadfastly refused to be explained, a thing that threatened constantly to change you, to laugh at your conventions, your prejudice, your expectations of life. Indeed Helena had presented him with the biggest and the most inexplicable paradox of all: how much he resisted change, yet wanted it desperately at the same time.

There came a knock at the door.

It was Helena.

His heart sank at the sight of her, and that it sank wounded him, because he did not want there to come a time when he would ever find her presence inconvenient, even if she had possibly, probably, apparently, and by all normal reckoning, slept with his girl. It was worse that she looked so beautiful.

She was also dressed up: a little black dress, gold dangly ear rings, the MUM necklace, and a wide, wide smile that made a brave attempt at disarming him, but faded when she realised she could not quite

manage it. "Hello Finn. Surprise is me?"

Yes, a surprise. His teeth were gritted, but he could not help himself melting into graciousness: "You look,... stunning, Helena."

Yes, every time he saw her it was the same, like seeing her for the first time, and always, always he was stunned by her, by her elegance, by her manner. There were many women of course, of equal beauty, but not all animated by the same spark that granted Helena this irresistible combination of vitality and vulnerability, of combativeness and compassion. And she saw that he saw this in her, and she liked it, and she judged the game was not entirely lost, that she might still trust in it, in this definite thing he had,... for her. And he saw that she saw it, and was determined she would not use it against him.

Such were the games they played.

"Sure," she said. "I scrub up well for woman of my age, but I am still bad girl, Finn. I notice you do not argue. Can I come in?"

"Of course, yes. You're going on somewhere?"

"I come collect you. We go out together. You will get changed please."

He wondered if she meant it, this haughtiness, the commandeering tone, the sharp inflection, or if it was merely an imperfection in her use of English. No matter. He liked it. He just had to remember never to take it seriously. "Ah well, that sounds lovely but, actually,... I was,..."

"I know, you are expecting home-alone with Hermione tonight. But she is worrying you might run away, so I am fast girl she sends catch you. Things to talk about, yes? But we kill that bird with same stones, I think, and since maybe I am that bird, I would like first words now on subject in self defence. You give permission?"

Ah!

He showed her through. She was ill at ease of a sudden, which was unlike her and this set him on edge as well. Helena ill at ease was even more dangerous and unpredictable. She sat heavily on the couch, flopped into it, then closed her eyes tight as a momentary spasm from her back took her breath. "Oooh!" It was not intended, not theatrical, but it served to remind him of her underlying physical vulnerability, and of the night he thought he was going to lose her, of

the dash to hospital and the long hours beside her bed.

"You okay?"

"Doctor said I would feel complaint from time to time."

Actually, she was thinking it was probably more that she had not had sex like yesterday in a long while. Anyway,... how to begin: She gave a sigh, somewhat exaggerated, looked at him for a hint of the beginning, but he was unhelpful, arms folded, closed off. This was not going to be easy. How to prepare him for the ground opening at his feet?

Hmm.

She thought she'd rehearsed her lines, but they'd fled, deserted her, left her high and dry. She ran her eye over his work-desk as if to find the words there, but saw only that he was tinkering with watches again. She didn't understand the fascination, only that when he wasn't doing it there was something wrong, so this was at least a good sign, a sign he was picking up, getting on. She would not want him to relapse into depression, undo all the work Carina had already done with him. Then she saw an application for the register of a foreign birth, which puzzled her. Did he have a love-child abroad he was telling no one about? Her suspicions were further aroused by the stealth with which he came between her and his desk, and when he moved away to sit opposite, the papers had been turned so she could not see them.

Ooh, interesting, Finn!

No, don't get distracted by this, Helena.

Focus. Focus.

All right. "So," she said. "Turns out is special occasion, yes?"

"Special occasion?"

"Your birthday."

It was?

It was!

But how did they know that, when even he'd forgotten it? Oh wait, it

was probably that time Hermione saw his driving license - date of birth and all that. Sneaky! What other intelligence had they gathered on him? What else did they know about him he did not know they knew? He felt a shiver at the thought of belonging to them in that way, that he lived in their diaries, their organisers, that they did not want to forget him. He noted also how, in his mind at least, *they* were now a couple, that he could not think clearly of one, without thinking of the other.

He shivered at the strangeness of it.

Helena levered herself gingerly from the sofa, one hand upon her back, massaging gently, and she kissed him on the cheek. Her closeness overwhelmed him - her scent, her warmth, the sheer electricity of her presence,...

"Happy birthday, Darling." She sat back down, blushed, and then: "I am really stunning for you?"

Finn snatched a breath. He could feel the ground shifting beneath him. Here she was again, Helena of the clouds, shaking apart what semblance of order he'd managed to secure for himself since seeing Hermione that afternoon, and since talking with Lionel.

A man's heart cannot be in two places at the same time, Finn! He can have one or the other,..

Not both!

Here she was, jumbling up his already jumbled conclusions, remodelling his muddled world in a shape he understood even less than before. Perhaps this was, after all, the natural condition of a man's life - this state of permanent confusion. And all he could say for sure was how much he loved it. She had slept with his girl, and he didn't care,...

He loved it,...

He loved her.

Really, Finn?

I don't know,... all I know is I can't hate her for it, and I can't shake this feeling when I'm with her,... this feeling of,...

Exhilaration, life,... excitement, purpose,...

Purpose?....

Okay, so,... what now? Charm, flirt?

Be the gentleman, Finn. No,...wait,... be honest, Finn!

"Stunning? Of course, yes."

She thought for a moment, grinned, twitched her brows at him, became predictably filthy. "We fuck if you like. There is plenty time." She was joking, wasn't she? Helena just being Helena? But why the provocative set of her lips, the jut of her chin? There was a challenge in it. What would she do if he said yes?

Don't you dare, Finn!

Don't worry, she'd probably slap me.

He smiled in defence. "That's awfully kind of you, Helena, but,..."

"I know. And you are probably not that good a shag anyway."

"Ha! Yes,... and why waste a body like yours on a man like me."

They could still joke then,.. the old running gag between them - the gorgeous, feisty Helena and the tired old Finn. Surely all was not lost.

"So,... is okay. You prefer sexual tension. I like this too. Maybe another time."

She turned her attention once more to his desk, shifted the ground under him again. She meant to spill the truth from him, a truth he did not know he possessed, and he was tempted to let her because then he might learn something useful, even if it came at the price of ruining himself.

"You have watch for me?" she asked - though in tone it registered more as a demand.

"Eh?"

She removed the Rolex from her wrist, held it out to him. "I swap for

this. I like the one you gave to Hermione for Valentine. You have similar? I too will be Valentine for you."

"Em,... well,... problem with that is it's not Valentine's, is it? And I don't think a guy can have two Valentines, can he? It doesn't seem altogether,... gentlemanly."

"Is fine with permissions, Finn."

But whose permissions? Hers? Hermione's?

He didn't dare ask.

"Well, another problem is your Rolex is obviously worth my entire collection times ten. I couldn't possibly take it."

Helena shook her head. "Was gift from Husband, years ago. Is worth nothing to me. So, surely, you have no further problems with this. Unless, of course, you don't want to?"

Decadence. That was something else Lionel had said. Her watch was worth thousands , but she didn't value it. She would as soon discard it even as sell it. She did not need the money. What else was that if not decadence? And decadence bred libertines, bred a taste for the bohemian, for strange sexual ideas born out of boredom at decency, *a taste for three way relationships,...*

"I,.. I've nothing that would suit you, Helena. Nothing I have is fine enough for that beautiful wrist of yours."

Oh! She liked that, loved his silver tongue, all the more for it being unconsciously done and therefore apparently sincere. But she hid that she liked it, pouted at him instead, feigned disappointment, feigned a smouldering silence, and waited there for him to leap into the trap of it.

He turned away, flustered, reached for his tin of keepers, flipped the lid and began to rummage. "I,... I have this one," he said. "It's a little Medana. A nice piece,... silver. Swiss. Thirties vintage. Keeps good time. Men's watches from this period were much smaller than they are now. Have you noticed? Maybe this one would suit,... it's quite a delicate little thing,... very elegant,... the lugs are kind of ornate,... Art Deco period,..."

She watched him carefully, filling out the void with words, buying time.

"Ah,.. yes, this is very pretty. I like it." She held out her wrist to him, veins uppermost, as if exposing a vulnerability, except Finn saw it for the bait that it was: soft, tempting fruit, and her with a dagger behind her back, waiting. "You will fasten for me please?"

He took a breath, steadied himself, tried to fasten the watch without touching her, but it was impossible, and she knew it, and she observed his discomfort with a growing curiosity and satisfaction.

What was it about her he was so afraid of? Well, obviously Helena, he's afraid of wanting you, or rather he's confused by it because plainly,...

He has always wanted you!

How sweet of him!

He pulled away, intoxicated by her scent, something powerfully erotic he thought. Had she been swimming in it? "Helena, I really can't do this."

"But is easy Finn, you just slip the strap through the little buckle,..."

"I mean,..."

She lowered her head, maintained eye contact. "I know *exactly* what you mean, Darling. And really, there is nothing to prevent us, except for a little imagination perhaps?"

Imagination? What was that supposed to mean? She'd slept with his girl and now she was coming for him? By what stretch of moral sensibilities could that be anything other than obscene? Or was it something else she meant, something more subtle and altogether much,... bigger? Because she was much bigger than all of that, more complex, more meaningful,... surely? There was a long silence then, eyes locked, each daring the other to blink.

Finn blinked. "So,.." he said.

"So?"

"So, it won't work. It can't work."

"What won't work?"

"Em,... two Valentines. Impossible."

"But you have permissions, Finn. Absolute. And cross my heart."

They'd talked,... Helena and Hermione. *Well of course they had, stupid!* But had Hermione already been mesmerised into thinking it was okay, that it was workable, this *thing*? *This,... impossible thing*. Hermione was no fool, no simpleton in the game of love so surely she could see how it would not work? Surely, it was she who should be telling them all it would not work.

"We're good friends, Helena."

Hmm, he was being evasive now. She hid her impatience, turned up the volume of her smile, allowed him a little road. "Yes,... yes we are good friends."

"And I'm looking forward to working with you."

No, she was already disappointed by his persistence in the completely the wrong direction, also confused. "Working?"

"The campsite."

"Oh, the campsite." *Of course, she'd forgotten the campsite! But it sounded so dreary of a sudden.*

"Lionel was talking about it this afternoon,..."

Note the further attempted shift of direction, Helena. Why spoil it? he's saying.

But this is not to spoil things Finn, this is to shake the foundations. To build again. Bigger. Better than before.

Time for another ground-shift then. Leg him up, hit him in the face with it: "Finn, you screwing around?

"Eh? What do you mean *screwing around*?"

Ah,.. that got his attention. So, more plainly: "You fuck with Carina, yesterday? Is no problem for me, really. But just curious."

"What makes you think that?"

He was blushing, struggling. Don't let him off the hook! "Hermione finds knickers on bathroom floor this morning. This is strange we are thinking, and we avoid obvious explanations, until we can think of no other."

"She found what? But she never said anything to me about it."

"Well, maybe she thinks you are low down lying bastard. Tells me instead. So?"
Finn covered his face, appalled. "Hermione thinks I slept with Carina? But that's ridiculous!"

"You deny?"

"Yes, I deny." He thought on it for a moment, searching for an explanation. "Well, obviously, they must have been Nina's,... pants."

Time for Helena to stumble; this was not the explanation she'd expected, and so freely given. "Nina? You mean Squinty's woman? You slept with Nina? Oh, Finn, that's much worse. What possessed you?"

"Are you having me on? What kind of guy do you think I am? She was in the spare room all night, okay? Well, I couldn't let her stay at Squinty's place after what happened yesterday could I? And Hermione had gone this morning before I had a chance to,... well,... introduce them. Nina must have dropped them when she had a shower last night or something. I don't know. And at the cafe, this afternoon, Hermione was thinking all of *that*, and never said a word?"

"Hmm. She is dangerous person to cross with Finn, like me. She likes to brood on things, long time maybe, then makes you pay later. I would never make that mistake with her."

Of course he'd not slept with Carina, or Nina or anybody else, and she'd told Hermione so, convinced her with a magical spell, or at least stalled her until Helena could get to the bottom of it. Nina's pants! They'd not thought of that one. Her smile began in the corners of her eyes. She tried to stop it escaping by compressing her lips tight, but it was no use, the smile leaked sideways then both ways, bursting at last into dimples, as she chuckled. Ironic too,... Finn accused of cheating, when it was she and Hermione who had,...

What was that, Helena?

Oh,... not cheating, just bending the rules a little. And yes, it was funny, all of it. They were both of them, she and Hermione, clearly hung up about Carina.

"Apologies for misunderstanding, Finn. You forgive?"

But Finn was barely listening. "Hermione thinks I'm a low down lying bastard? Like Bryan?"

"No, no. I tell her there must be another explanation. Anyway, Carina she would forgive, under the circumstances. Nina perhaps not."

"What do you mean 'circumstances'?"

And there, though he did not yet realise it yet, she had him exactly where she needed him. Now she could really blow things apart, and they could all move on.

"There is more happening here, Finn. On both sides. Is there not?"

"Oh?"

"All right. So, you play dumb. I take first turn. Here is first stone to kill bird: Hermione and I,... yesterday,..."

Finn panicked, realised he'd been manoeuvred into talking about what he most needed to talk about, yet definitely did not want to talk about, not yet, and hopefully never. "There's no need to explain all of that," he said. He got up to leave, to hide, to cover his ears, to go: nanananananana.

"Time's pressing," he said. "and we don't want to be late,..."

"We accuse you of cheating when you know very well, or at least you suspect there is something sexy going on between me and Hermione. And you are not angry, Finn. Indeed, you are,.. ever so chilly-polite about it. Why?"

"Why what?"

"So,... polite about it."

"Well, what do you expect me to do?"

"Nothing,... other than exactly,.. this. You are so,..."

"What? What am I? Passionless? Stupid? Dull?"

"No, no,.. no,.. darling,.. stop."

"A total loser? A plank? Tosser? Mug? Cuckold? Take your pick."

"FINN! I warn you before about self pity. You want sharp edge of tongue?"

Finn waved his hands in mock surrender. "Oooh, heaven forbid!" But sarcasm was not his thing. "Sorry," he said.

She took a breath. At least he was listening now. "We went to a hotel," she said.

He sat back down, waited for her to go on, to reshape his world. Again.

Okay, so they went to a hotel, so what? Maybe they were just sleepy?

"So,..." she said.

"So?"

"So now is your turn. You say something, so long as is not self pity and this nonsense about being cuckoos."

"Okay,... well I,... I guessed it must have been something like that."

"Is that it? Is that all you have to say? You want me take my turn again?"

"No,.. " He took a moment, tried to order his thoughts, but in the end he just had to trust the right words would come out as he spoke them. "Apologies for the self pity. I didn't mean any of it. Look, Hermione,... she told me you'd asked her to,... well,... you know,.."

Heavens, he was hard work! It was like pulling teeth! Help him out a bit, Helena! "Give sexual feeling?"

"Exactly,... so I assumed that's what you'd gone to do. I mean, I imagine you couldn't do it at your place with Kyle around, and same at Hermione's with Annie."

"Yes, Finn. But we did not set out with this in mind. It just happened. We saw the hotel and, so,... "

"Okay."

"Is still your turn Finn."

"It is? But I don't know what else to say, Helena."

"Tell me what you are thinking. I mean, about *that*."

"You sound like Carina now."

"I take that as compliment, but only if you answer truthfully and let me inside your head as you would with her. What are you *thinking*!"

Helena inside his head? But she'd been in there from the beginning, from the first moment. "I'm thinking, a thing like that takes, what? An hour, maybe? But you were away all day, which kind of suggests something else to me."

Okay, they were finally getting to it. *Come to me darling:* "Still your turn, Finn. What is this 'else' it suggests to you?"

"Well, obviously, it suggests you've stolen my girl, Helena."

What? How can he think that?

But Helena, what else is he to think when he sees things only from his own narrow perspective?

Okay, so he's confused but she can work with this: "But that's simply,... *nonsense*, darling."

"But what else can it mean?"

"That we are in love, she and I. But this is girl stuff and you need not trouble yourself with it."

Nice try, Helena.

"Don't give me that. I'm not stupid."

"All right. But the main thing is your girl is waiting. She has birthday wishes and cake with sparkles. She is still your girl. And she loves you so much. You are lucky man."

Finn rather doubted it, could not see how any of that could be true, now. "What puzzles me is how insistent you were that we get together."

"What?"

"'*I make lover for you out of Hermione*'. That's what you said."

"I really talk like that? But why is puzzle? I knew from starts you were perfect for each other."

"Perfect for you too?"

"Oh,... I know,... is confusing for everyone."

"Did you know,... then,... that you wanted her? Did she?"

"No,... was friends only I hoped. I'm not even sure she likes me that much in the beginning. Or trusts me to be around you. Not then."

"But you *do* want her, don't you? It was more than just the once. And now you're in love with her?"

"Oh, yes. For sure, yes. Absolutely."

How could she be so blind to his point of view? "But you see, I can't,..."

"Can't?"

"I can't possibly compete with you,... I mean, for Hermione."

Compete? What is he talking about? "Is not competition, Finn."

"But what else can it be? Look,... we need to work out what's the least hurt all round. And I won't get in the way, or make things difficult,... if you want to be together,... fine."

"But this is not mathematical problem. Is not algebra. You say you don't want Hermione now?"

"Well of course I do,.. I didn't say it wouldn't hurt, I mean, letting her go."

"But why must there be hurt Finn? Is obvious to me why not, why not to you also? Hermione is big girl. Big enough for us both. I love her. You love her. She loves *us*. Is nothing competition about it. We are all winners. Everyone is happy."

It was clear she believed her own words. Finn groaned, sank his head into his hands. Carina was right, Helena was manipulating them towards some sort of three-way relationship. It couldn't be any clearer now. And as the dick-for-brained guy, he was supposed to want this more than anything - Hermione riding one end of him, Helena riding the other while they fondled each others tits, and snogged in the middle, or any of a multiplicity of alternate erotic fantasies. So how come he was the only one who could see the madness in it, the decadence, the tragedy,...

The impossibility,... I mean,...

All right,... he couldn't even pee when someone was standing next to him, so how the hell he was supposed to make love to a girl with someone else in the same bed? To say nothing of the fact the other person would be Helena:

Finn you know you have pimple on bottom?

Finn, hurry please. Is my turn.

"Look,... I,... I really don't understand how that kind of thing would work, Helena."

Helena shrugged, dismissive, unable to see the problem. "What kind of thing?"

"You know?... three in a bed, and all that,..."

Helena was affronted. "What? Don't be so vulgar, darling. We are talking no such thing."

"Than what?"

"I don't know. You think I make habit of this? I don't understand either. But who cares? Oh,... Pfft,.. you and Hermione are both the same, both expecting simple conclusions to life. But life is not like that. Sometimes it requires us to be more subtle and imaginative."

Not three in a bed then? But if not that, then what? Were they to draw up a rota? Or was he just being too literal? He would have asked but feared she'd slap him for his indecency. No, wait a minute, Finn, try this one: "If you loved Hermione, I mean really loved her, you couldn't share her with anybody."

Helena rolled her eyes in despair. "You are not any body, Finn. *Obviously.* And I am glad to share her in love with you."

"If you were a man I'd have to have to hate you, both of you. Like I hate Richard and Kathleen."

"But you don't hate us. Why?"

No he didn't hate them. Far from it. Good point. Come to think of it he didn't hate Richard or Kathleen either. He didn't hate anyone! Was there something wrong with him? Something missing? Was he leaking somewhere?

"Dammit, Helena, I don't know why I don't hate you."

"It is because you love us."

"Well, of course I love you but,...."

"You *love* Hermione,... and you *love* me."

"I love you, yes, of course but not like *that."*

"Yes, you do. And you must admit it, Finn. I insist"

He laughed. "I don't see how you can insist."

"All right, we try it this way: you would be comfortable with me taking up with a man who is not you?"

What? This was a new tack, and he sensed at once he had to be careful. "Well,... why wouldn't I?... Of course I'd be,... very happy for

you,.."

Except,... his heart missed a beat and he hesitated getting his words out, and Helena picked up on that, and Finn knew she'd picked up on it, knew also therefore the game was up, that he was exposed. She had shaken the truth from him, a truth, as ever, he had not known he possessed, that he was inexplicably uncomfortable at the thought of Helena going with another man.

Uncomfortable, Finn?

All right, Dammit, I'm jealous at the thought of it.

And why? Because *obviously* he wanted her for himself.

But that was stupid. He was just,... attached to her that's all, *concerned* for her.

What about Carina then? *Carina* and another man! Explore that one!

He frowned, trying to burrow deep into the problem. No, he wanted Carina to be happy in whatever way she chose, wanted her to find the right man eventually, if that was the right thing for her, but that man was not him. They'd already explored this: it was true, they might have been lovers, explored some uncharted the depths that way, but it would not have taken long to bottom it, and they would always have bobbed back up to the surface as friends. With Carina, it seemed, he already had the perfect relationship, if she was with someone else or not.

So, there you are, Finn. You missed it! Jealousy was the key, the litmus test of that certain kind of loving. Obvious really. In short, he wanted them both, Helena and Hermione, wanted them wanting him and no one else except each other. He looked up into Helena's eyes. She was waiting for him to go on, to reveal more of himself but he was pale with the shock of it now and the lid was on, tight, for self protection. Instead he repeated to himself the old mantra: *if a man is with one woman, but wants another, it's unfortunate but only stupid if he acts upon it.*

"Look, Helena,..."

"No, is fine, Finn, darling. Relax. All is hypotheticals. There is no one else for me, but Hermione,... and you."

Okay, she thought. He'd suffered enough. She'd revealed to him the obvious path and, rocky though it was, it was a sure and certain way ahead. No need to set out right away though. Time first to smooth him over, let him catch his breath.

"You are right," she said. "Time is pressing. You must go change your clothes now. But you will be smart please? I don't want to appear overdressed."

"Helena, you're always overdressed."

"I know," she smiled. "So are you." Then the look of certainty, her confidence in the rightness of this madness flickered momentarily into doubt. She looked inward, and Finn paused.

"I go too far, sometimes," she said. "We are all in a pickle for sure. But if we come at things sideways,..."

"Sideways?"

"Not direct. Not,... taking everything so literally all the time."

"You mean like how I was your ex-husband, but not really?"

"Yes. I know you don't understand me. No one does."

"Wait,... so,... even if I'm your lover now, as well as Hermione's - I'm not really that either?... it's just sort of pretend,..."

"I don't know Finn. Clearly you would like that for real, and to be honest with you, so would I. But we will only solve the complications by coming at them *sideways*. And not by vulgar porn-flick three in bed jumping. For now what's simpler to understand is this: anything you want darling, I will make it happen. And if that is not enough, you want more, you tell me and I will get it for you."

She stood, one hand to the small of her back and she cast about for somewhere to hide her eyes, hide from him the sudden need in them. Also, for some inexplicable reason her eyes were filling, and she was desperate to heal the rift so she reached out her other hand, but he was already coming, uncertain, afraid. "Please, Finn, now you will hug me?"

So he folded her to his chest, rested his chin upon the top of her head, his lungs collapsing as she came cushion soft into the gentle crush of his arms. She had challenged him at times beyond endurance, made him wish he was safe and warm at home in Aylsebury, blissfully ignorant of Kathleen's infidelity, and his Summer House stinking of weed, a constant reminder of both his failure and his redundancy as a father. But the truth was always better than deception, and if Helena was the truth of things, this constant destruction and disruption, this tearing up of convention, of common sense and all the rules of love, at least in so far as he had understood them,...

Then so be it.

Chapter Ninety One

Nina could not remember returning to the garage, to Mulligan's house, and only recovered from her daze when she realised the phone was ringing. So, the phone was ringing, but who cares? Except,... before she could stop herself, she had picked it up, something automatic in her movements. And then, when she caught up with herself and was about to set it back down, she heard his voice and it was anger that kept her holding on to it:

"Nina, love?" He sounded out of breath, distant,... reticent, but hopeful. "Nina love, you there?"

She did not know if she could speak, if she should just put the phone back down and get on with clearing out, and for a time then she simply stood there, mute still with the shock of her discovery on the boat, and trembling with rage. And finally: "Yes,... I am here. But I am packing bag. You will never see me again, John Mulligan."

"Eh? Hold on, what's up lass?"

"What's up? What's up is there are,..." she bit her tongue. Everyone knew these days there were machines listening to the phone lines, reading emails, scanning for trigger words, like "guns", then men would drop from the sky with automatic weapons, break open the doors and shoot you down.

"What? There's what?" He sounded so,... lost, so confused, so *vulnerable*.

Don't fall for it, Nina. "There is 'stuff' on your boat."

"Stuff? What stuff?"

"Serious shit stuff, and you know what I mean. You are damned fool, and I'm so,... gone from here."

"Woa, woa, woa. *That* stuff. Listen, it's nowt to worry about. I'll see to it."

But his dismissive tone was hardly convincing. He would tell her, tell anyone, whatever he thought they wanted to hear. She could not decide if his foolishness was simply on account of his childishness, or if it should be registered more on a scale of evil.

No,... *dammit*, he wasn't evil. Just simple minded and very, very stupid.

"How? How you see to it from hospital bed?" she said. "You are lying bastard and I don't trust you. And I'm out of here."

"All right,... all right, but I didn't know it was going to be,... you know,... stuff like that,... honest."

"Honest? You don't know honest, you bastard. I hope your big dick drops off!"

"What?" *Oh, ho! So she'd noticed then, eh, Squinty! Waggle it about mate - you've still, got what they want!* "Hey, look I'm sorry, all right? Don't go, Nina. Please, love."

Please? Had he really said the 'P' word? Nina hesitated in case she'd misheard, though it was also partly from having run out of her own expletives.

"Nina?"

"I'm listening."

"I'm sorry, love, sorry I was grumpy with you this morning, sorry I startled you yesterday. I didn't mean owt. The towel just fell off - like. It were an accident."

"Why I don't believe you? I know what you did to Hermione. You are not safe man around women, John. You are sleazy letchering bastard."

"Eh? I didn't do nowt to 'er. What she been sayin'?"

"I talk to Finn. He tells me everything." Of course Finn had said nothing, refused point blank which was interesting in itself, but Squinty was not to know.

"That Fancy Pants Finnucky guy? All right, but it were a misunderstandin'. And like I told you before, dunt matter what he says or 'er for that matter. She led me on, right? Fuckin' shameless tart." He was forgetting himself, his manners slipping, his voice rising. "And you stay away from that smarmy southern git, you hear me?"

Nina came back even more voluble. "I talk to who I want. You do not

own me John Mulligan. I find passport and papers yesterday. You were going to tell me about that?"

"Why you little sneak,... you bin through my mail? All right,... all right,... I was going to tell you, yes."

"Again, John,... why I don't believe you?"

His tone, defensive, combative, changed now. It was as if he'd accepted all his wrong doing, was resigned to losing her, losing everything. He became soft voiced, self-pitying. It was almost touching, but too sudden and Nina was suspicious. Why would he think she'd stay, after all he'd done? Why would he even try to persuade her?

"I don't know love. They said they'd send 'em, that's all. I dint ask for 'em or now't. Dint think they meant it. Thought they were just leading me on like. So I didn't say owt to you. I mean, no point, was there?"

Yes, this sounded convincing enough, even to himself. He was so good at making things up on the fly!

"But then what? What you think you do then John Mulligan, with my passport?"

"Dunno,.. give it back you, I suppose."

"After you make me beg for it first? Suck your dick for it maybe? Is this what you are thinking?"

Well,... there'd be no harm in trying,... "What? No,.. course not. I were only thinkin' maybe,.."

"Maybe? Maybe what?"

"Maybe I thought you might,.."

"What? No fucking way I go with you now, if you are last man on earth,..."

"No,... I meant, I thought you might look a bit more,... you know,... kindly towards me, that's all, lass. I mean if I were to get it for you."

"But I am already kindly to you John. I am already *too* kindly for my own good, and should have gone long ago. Anyway what you mean,

kindly? You mean *Fuck?*"

"I meant,... oh, bloody hell, lass, what's the use? So I fancy you summat rotten. Yes, fuck, maybe,.. sometime,... I dunno. What's wrong with that?"

"Fancy what part of me John?"

"Eh? Watchermean, which part?"

"Tits, arse, cunt,... which? Which bit you like? I found your magazines, John. You want tie me up like in those pictures?... make trussed hog of me?"

"You bin rooting through my house as well? But that's just,... bloke stuff. Don't get all neurotic over that." His soothing tone began to slip again, return to type: "Typical woman! You all think you're so,... bloody superior, so complicated, don't you? Well men aren't so straight forward neither. It's just that we're supposed to know what you want while you've not the slighted bit of interest in understandin' us - just crying rape every time a guy gets a tingly feeling at the shape of your arse in a pair of tight pants. And if that's how you feel, and you know what we're like, then why do you wear the fuckin' tight pants?"

He was attempting to express himself, not particularly well, but Nina listened, and not without sympathy. But he was still a stupid Neanderthal and could not be trusted. "My pants too tight for you, John? Is this what you say?"

No Nina, he's saying your tight pants make him want to shag you, and if you don't want him to feel that way you should think about dressing a little more demurely. "Okay, so I should dress like grandmother for you, then you keep dick in pants?" On second thoughts,... it probably wouldn't make any difference, so you dress how you like, Nina.

Squinty had been quiet for a while. He'd rung with the intention of smoothing her over, of having her overlook the fact of his clumsiness, his misogyny, his coarseness. But it was evident she'd turned his house upside down looking for the real John Mulligan and found him, and she'd thrown himself back in his face. He couldn't help what he was, and he couldn't change, not at his age, at least not on his own. Maybe love could change him, but it was too late for that, and worse the pain killers were wearing off.

Forget the smoothing over bit then, John. He just he need her to stay, or he was in big trouble.

If only for another couple of days.

So, play the reverse psychology card: "It's all right, love. You go if you want. You still got that debit card? Should be enough money on that to take you wherever you want to go, and then some. Take it and welcome. I just thought,... "

Nina took the card from her purse and bent it in two. She'd cut it up later, wanted nothing from him, least of all his dirty gun-running money.

Letchering Big Dick Bastard!

"You thought what?" she said. "*How do I pull my trousers on with hole in arse? I know, I get Nina to do it.* Well Nina is coming nowhere near your trousers, or your arse, you hear me? What you think is funny?"

He was laughing now, but not unkindly, not mocking. She had genuinely triggered something in him, made him laugh,... at himself, at the sorry dishevelled old bugger he'd become. "Sorry love,.. got to be careful of me stitches."

"You will pardon me if I don't care?"

"Oh,.. Nina, lass, there's a fire in you all right. God 'elp any man who crosses you."

"You have already done it, John."

"Then it's lucky I'm where I am. I'll miss you."

"You'll kiss me? No way,.."

"No,... I said I'll *miss* you."

"Oh,.. all right. You know what is funny, John Mulligan? You could have had me any time. Only needed to ask."

"Aye well, forgive me if I don't believe you on that score, love. But if it's true then it's the story of me life, innit? But if that's how you really feel then don't go, eh. Hang around a bit. I'll be a week in here, then home. Let's talk then,... and who knows?..."

Was he serious?

"All I know, John Mulligan, is I am packing bag and leaving. Now!"

"You keep sayin' that. Well,.. you'd better get on with it then."

"What will you do?"

"Me? Watcher bothered bout me for? I'll be reet. Same as usual. Muddle through, that's me."

"Smuggling? No more smuggling. Is too dangerous John."

"Said muddling, not smuggling, yer div. As for that, I'd promise you I'll quit, but we both know what I'm like. Still, it's unlikely I'll be puttin' out to sea again for a while."

"So how you get rid of stuff then?"

"Em,... like I said, I'll think of summat."

Nina had an idea of how she might help him in this. She was still going, definitely, but something in this one last act appealed to her, and might be to her advantage anyway. There was also an element of revenge.

"Never did take me out in that boat, John Mulligan."

"Nah well, reckon you were havin' me on about that."

"Oh? You think I can't handle boat?"

"Like to see you try."

"So, when is next tide?"

"Eh? Oh, there's another hour yet."

There was a long pause while she thought back over what he'd said. He had, to a small degree, redeemed himself with that last minute splutter of self deprecation, but she couldn't decide now if it was genuine or yet another ploy in his charm arsenal, a weapon of last resort to be deployed when things were going really bad for him.

Did he really want her to stay for romantic reasons?

Don't go there Nina.

And might she still make something out of him?

"Nina love?...."

"We say goodbye John."

"But you'll stick around,...like?"

"I promise nothing where you are concerned, then I am never disappointed."

"Ah,.. good lass."

So, high tide was in an hour. It couldn't be that difficult, could it? She would put out to sea, a little before sunset, get far enough away from land, then tip the guns over the side. Then she'd come back in after dark, guided by the shape of the window in the flat above the Sea View Cafe, aim a little to the north of it. She would beach the boat, then let the sea do what it wanted with it - break it up, draw it back out - who cared? As for her, she'd disappear, become another foreigner, believed overboard, drowned. Everyone around here knew her as Nina anyway, a pet name, not the name on her passport.

*Poor Nina. Just like that,... g*one!

Chapter Ninety Two

They had bought him a gift.

"It's a broken watch," said Hermione.

"Kyle got it for us off ebay," said Helena.

It was in poor shape, probably past repairing, the watch of a brand generally not thought of as worth preserving anyway, but he did not say so, indeed he was moved by the sentiment, that they had conspired together, possibly for weeks over this one small thing. For him.

"Ha! Just up my street," he said. "Thank you."

He only hoped it was not a metaphor of things to come, that the final part of himself when tested would reveal itself to be similarly cheap and unfixable.

Forty nine years old.

Too late to change your ways now, eh, Finn?

We'll see.

It was a warm evening, a warm, golden light painting a paradise of the tea garden, the tide nearing high and breaking gently within a stone's throw of where they sat, late-day amber sunbeams twinkling upon an infinite tranquillity. Finn sat in shirt-sleeves, the women in little black cocktail dresses. They had sung happy birthday to him, sweet voices in harmony as if they'd been practising. The song had always embarrassed him; the solicitations, the sentiments of others always setting him on edge. It was not that he did not believe in them, more that he did not *dare* believe in them, did not dare believe in love, that he was lovable.

Interesting, Finn!

Earlier, while he'd busied himself changing, Helena had taken out her 'phone, Googled the meaning of: "registering a foreign birth". The top result was not what she'd expected: applying for Irish Citizenship. She'd heard the Irish authorities were now awash with such applications from the English, who had Irish parents or grandparents.

The relationship between England and Ireland was a complex one and she did not fully understand it, but she knew the Irish had been freely settling in England for centuries, even though it had been a foreign country, technically speaking since, 1916. There had been an article in the newspaper about it; Ireland would remain a part of the European Union, thereby creating an anomaly when England left it, and the English of Irish ancestry, millions of them, were now seizing upon the possibility of changing their nationality as a way of keeping their European identity, post BREXIT.

Finn's father had been Irish.

Hadn't he told her that, once?

But what could he possibly want with an Irish passport?

Well, what else?

Ireland.

She had been there once, a long time ago, with her Husband,... somewhere in County Donegal, to a little seaside town on the west coast of the Republic - suspected Kyle had been conceived there, actually. Her husband hadn't particularly enjoyed it, and neither had she, found it insufferably cold and wet, but the hotel they'd stayed in had seemed a profitable little venture, so he'd bought it. It was things like that that had drawn her to him, his bigness, his decisiveness with money. For a long time it had covered up his smallness in other ways. She wondered now if he still owned it.

Hmm, her husband!

Unhelpful distraction, darling.

It had been his deceit over other women that had repelled her. But why? Why had she not thought to make a threesome with any of them? They'd been attractive enough? Her husband was, after all something of a connoisseur of female beauty. Well, obviously, Helena, while it might have tickled your husband's fancy for a short while, it was clear he did not love you, or any of them. Not like you love Hermione and Finn. Your husband was a man driven by the acquisition of things: cars, property, money, women.

All you ever wanted, Helena, was a home.

A home?

She had assured Hermione Finn had not slept with Carina. Hermione had known it all along, she'd said, but was relieved to have it confirmed, and had laughed to learn the knickers on the bathroom floor had belonged to Nina, that Finn's sweet nature and chivalry had nearly earned him her eternal mistrust. Helena had not wanted to spoil the evening by also telling her he was obviously thinking of leaving them, again - this time for Ireland - and that once he got his passport, or whatever, it was just a short hop from Ireland to setting up on the Continent as a European man again, leaving them to rot in post BREXIT Britain.

She remembered his embrace, the gentle crush of him, as he'd comforted her, allowed herself to imagine the softness of him penetrating her in other ways, then wondered if it was in the nature of all men to say one thing while thinking entirely the opposite. She told herself she was speculating in all of this, that there was no point upsetting Hermione unnecessarily, but she could not ignore the feeling in the pit of her stomach - the all too familiar sense of betrayal at the hands of a man.

She was so sure she'd known him better than that!

Is this really what you are thinking, Finn?

It had left her subdued. She'd painted a smile over it, but Hermione had sensed it, assumed she was in pain with her back and, as usual, not telling anyone. It was either that or she'd argued with Finn, gone too far with him over pushing this three way thing and, as might be expected, he'd freaked. He needed time to get used to the idea, to be coaxed in, but Helena was not one for waiting, for letting things settle, bit by bit, and his caution had infuriated her.

Sure, she might have accepted that as being the cause, but when she studied Finn he seemed pretty much the same as usual, his face unperturbed. It was Helena's back then. Perhaps she could help out later,... images crossed her mind of rubbing Helena down with olive oil, massaging gently, rendering slick and glistening that pale, warm skin, feeling those willowy curves under her palms.

A song came to her from long ago - *I kissed a girl and I liked it*,...

Oh,... stop it!

The fancy took flight, yielded further images, of Finn joining in with the massage, Helena moaning with the pleasure of it.

A little to the left Finn,...

Oh leave him be, Helena, he's doin' just fine.

Do me after Finn?

Hmm?

All this as he was blowing out the candles on his cake, smiling up at them both - and neither he nor Helena knowing the depth of her capacity for sexual fantasy.

Did she have any oil?

No,.. dammit!

Well, Helena was bound to have some - something deliciously and romantically aromatic, no doubt. And when they were done, she'd rest Helena's head in her lap, while Finn made love to her, after she'd massaged the right parts of him of course, to within an inch of coming.

Hmmm,...

I mean,... Helena would have to go first, then she could get the best of him - only polite - and Hermione would take what was left, like close friends and lovers do.

Fuck's sake, Minnie! Wake up!

Well, okay, so what? It was Helena's idea, this weird thing, and Hermione was simply warming to it, thinking through the possibilities.

"Thanks," said Finn. "Both of you."

It was a moment he had dreamed of, the moment that most stirred him, looking across a table at them, and them looking back at him,...

Mona Lisa smiles,....

deja vous,...

"Is nothing," said Helena. "Was very cheap." Finn misread the dismissive tone as dry humour, but Hermione sensed more the sharpness in it, especially when it burst her fantasy mid coitus, so to speak.

Oh!...

There was definitely something discordant there.

Finn laughed. "It looks it," he said. "But seriously,... thanks."

Helena looked at him, her eyes like hooks.

He wouldn't really go, would he? Not after everything they'd said and shared?

Bastard!

Well why not, Helena? You're a foul mouthed bossy britches, embarrassing to be with, you treat everyone like dirt, and you slept with his girlfriend.

All right, all right!... so I'm working on this side of myself, and as for the girlfriend,... I couldn't help it. That was not in my character at all!

No?

Well, all right, maybe,...

She steeled herself to softness and smiles: "Seriously, you are welcome." And then, after a short sharp sigh, as if in resignation to her fate: "We are so seriously in love with you, Finn. You know this, I hope?"

Hermione drew an anxious breath. "It's true, darlin'. We do,... love you." She smiled to render the statement more ambiguous, to open it up to the many and varied meanings of the world 'love'. *Careful not to frighten him, Helena!* "Love you ever so much." And then, quickly: "You heard anything from Carina?"

Finn was glad for the distraction. "Nothing yet. But she'll be okay."

"Well, hopefully they'll see sense and give her job back, or un-suspend or,... whatever."

"I suspect she has other plans anyway."

Helena wondered if those plans featured Finn. "What will she do instead?"

"She's talking about going to Ireland. Setting up in teaching, and private psycho-analytical practice. Something like that."

To Ireland,... ah!

Was that it then? Is that what he and Carina had talked about yesterday? Was she wrong? Was Finn indeed about to cheat on them - I mean while they were cheating on him? And how could she condemn him for that?

Don't worry, I find a way!

Hermione breathed easier. She knew Carina was still a potential lover in waiting, but Ireland sounded such a comfortably long way away now, better three hundred miles of choppy sea after all, than three hundred miles of motorway - not as easy to cross at short notice. "Well,... I hope,... things work out for her."

"I'm sure they will," said Finn.

They better fucking not, thought Helena.

Finn detected something then, at last, the dagger of Helena's eyes, and though they stirred him deeply, he could not fathom it. Had he said something to upset her?

"Anyway," he went on. "That was a lovely meal. Thank you, Hermione."

Hermione blushed. "You're welcome, darlin'. Sure,...okay,... but look,... and I'm sorry if I'm gettin' this all wrong, but I'm pickin' up this weird vibe. Is everythin' all right between you two?"

"Me and Carina? Yes,..."

"No, I mean you and Helena. I only ask 'cos 'fore she went round to get you she was all smiles and royal confidence, you know? Like she is? And now she's sittin' there with a face like a slapped arse and lookin' mainly daggers at you."

Helena denied it at once. "Who is slapped arse, please? Not me? And I have no daggers. Absolute. Cross my heart." She feigned brightness, painted back the smile: "Is lovely evening, yes?"

Hermione frowned. "Hmm,... Finn?"

"What? No,... at least Helena's not upset me. We're fine, aren't we, Helena? Have I said anything to upset you?"

"Nothing Finn, darling. All is,... hunky dory between us. For sure it is."

Hermione looked from one to the other. Helena was definitely harbouring some hostility, Finn the same innocence as usual, which most likely meant he'd said something without knowing it - clumsy with his mouth, and Helena quick to take offence.

"Well, whatever it is," she said, "or isn't, I'd like you both to kiss and make up while I fetch coffee. Okay? Then we'll talk."

Hermione rose, stared at each in turn for emphasis before leaving them alone.

Finn was puzzled. "Helena?"

She looked away, evasive, thought twice, then gathered steam, leaned close and hissed at him: "Why you need Irish Passport, Finn?"

"What? Ah,... wait,..."

"After everything we talk about, after warm embraces, after happy birthdays all round, you think of running away? Again? This time to Ireland? You set up with Carina maybe?"

"What? No,.."

It was not a good idea to squirm in front of an assertive Helena, and especially not when she was in full flow like this. But while he was happy to be pushed around, it was also important to let her know how far she could go. Finn leaned back, grew serious, took a breath, and

Helena sensed the darkening in him, feared the worst, feared confirmation and grew quiet, lips trembling.

"We've often talked about it, yes," he said. "Talked about it yesterday in fact. I mean,.. going to Ireland, not the *together* bit,... well, not seriously anyway. But that's not why I'm thinking about citizenship."

"But what other reason is there? You can go to Ireland for holidays any time. No passport required."

"Helena, trust me, I'm not planning on setting up with Carina. Look, you're a woman who's learned how to survive, and you've done that by always looking at your options, and where possible you've created fresh opportunities for yourself just in case you need them, right? Why wouldn't you? And only God knows what shape England will be in post BREXIT. So, can you honestly say, if you were in my position, you wouldn't do the same?"

In truth she could not, but that was not the point. Just what the point was, exactly, she'd lost track of, but whatever it was he'd just said was not it.

"You think England will *sink.* Is that it? You think you jump ship? Leave us here to drown?*"*

"No,... I mean, it may sink, bits of it already have, and things are such a mess now, but it's more of an existential thing,..."

"Translate please, *existential?"*

"Meaning of life stuff."

"Meaning of life is in Ireland now? This is news to me. I am missing something?"

"No,.. it's probably not there, either. I just always thought it was, that's all. Hard to explain."

"Then I am thinking unless you can explain otherwise you are more likely coward in matters of love, and seek early exit."

"Again, no. Look if you must know I have an early memory of sitting on my Dad's shoulders up there on the promenade, overlooking the harbour and trying to see Ireland. It was his home. He died the year

after that, and I always had it in my mind that's where he'd gone. Just possessing that passport would make me feel safe, like my Dad always used to make me feel safe."

"This is true?"

Finn thought for a moment "Yes,..." It sounded like something he might have made up on the hoof, but playing it back inside his head, he was struck by the sense of an inadvertent revelation. And it was in fact,... true.
"Pfft, I am frustrated to admit this is a good answer, Finn. You are complicated man."

"You're only surprised by that because you expect all men to be simple."

"Oh?" Her eyes lit up at the challenge. He was smiling, but there'd been something combative in his tone all the same. "You want to fight with me? We are supposed to be kissing and making up."

"So long as we never draw blood or lose respect for one another, I'm looking forward to fighting with you, Helena."

"Pah! In this you will always lose."

"Why?"

"Because you are a man, bound by your natural relations with women and that thing between your legs. And as a woman I can refuse to give you what you want, so you lose. And if you are a bad man and take it by force, you will hurt me, and you will still lose. You will always lose with women, Finn."

"Sounds about right. But if I said you were wrong, that I didn't want it?"

"Then you will still hurt me, but differently, hurt my pride, which is much worse, because I want that you want it, though you must never know this and believe instead I shall never give it to you. So,... you will lose again. I am more complicated than you. Trust me."

"Oh,... I do."

"All right,... so,... you convince me. Go head. Apply for this Irishiness if it comforts you, but we say nothing to Hermione. Promise?"

"Em,... no,... because that gives you an emotional power over me."

"For sure it does, and I will use it if I have to."

"That's not exactly the best way to start a relationship, is it? I mean not the kind we,... I mean,... you and Hermione are proposing here."

"What we are *proposing*? Finn you speak like man will balls in mouth."

"With balls in my mouth? Well, at least,..."

Their fencing was cut short when Hermione returned with an over-bright smile, a tray of coffee, and a bottle of wine tucked under her arm. "So," she said. "We there yet?"

Helena turned away, petulantly. "No. This man, he infuriates me."

"What? Finn?... oh don't be daft, Helena. What's the problem?"

"Finn applies for Irish Citizenship is problem."

Hermione couldn't see the significance of this at first. It was curious, but hardly warranted Helena's displeasure, unless she was missing something,...

"Oh? That's nice, Finn. I remember you tellin' me your Dad was Irish. So you can get dual citizenship 'cos of that? That's really cool."

Finn couldn't believe Helena had blurted it out and stared at her wide eyed - it was just a relief Hermione seemed to be taking it so easily.

"Well," said Helena, dismissive. "You hurt my feelings. You say you will not sleep with me. And no,... I have not been drinking, and I am not taking pain killers."

"I didn't say I wouldn't sleep with you. And anyway you don't want me to."

"Yes, you did say it, you said you didn't want it. And I never said I don't want you to."

"But, Helena, you say it all the time. You say: 'Why waste a body like mine on a guy like you?' And I say: I'm probably not that good a shag

anyway.' and then we laugh."

"But is joke, Finn. Is flirting."

"Then,... you mean it,... seriously?"

"No. I don't mean that either. Oh,... you drive me fucking crazy! And is not funny, Hermione."

Hermione had not seen Helena this way before. It was obvious to her what she needed most, but that would have to come later, and gently, and not at all seriously, but tenderly. She would have to be tickled into paroxysms of laugher first. "You'll not win with her, Finn. You better quit."

Finn nodded, exasperated, bowed out of the fray. Helena followed through: "But Hermione,..."

"Oh no you don't, Helena. Your relationship with Finn's weird enough and I'm not gettin' mixed up in it, but I will say this: given the state of things, I mean generally, like, I don't blame 'im applyin' for that passport. And if I could screw the English in me by turnin' myself Irish, I'd fuckin' do it. And considerin' what we bin up to behind 'is back, it seems such a little thing, wouldn't you say?"
Helena looked affronted. "But it was one time only,..."

"Oh? Well thanks very much, but if you'll forgive me, that's not the impression you gave me last night."

Knots. Helena was being tied in knots. She was becoming emotionally fragile, agitated, little beads of sweat breaking out on her brow. *Was she all right?* "I didn't mean it that way."

"Then how? How do you mean it?"

"Oh,... please, I have headache now. I think I should go,..."

"Don't you fuckin' dare, lady. You started this, now we finish it and we move forward 'afore we get up from this table, if it takes all night. Right? Helena?"

Helena, sullen now, nodded. "Okay, but remember, was you who asked for kissing. And please don't say 'finish'. I don't like this word."

"Din't mean 'finish' like that. 'Bout you Finn? You want to finish? Go home to fuckin' Aylesbury. Bale out, jump ship or whatever. Go to fuckin' Ireland?"

"I'm going nowhere. We move forward. Clarify. Know where we're coming from. What we expect from each other. If it takes all night."

"And finish? You want to finish Finn?"

"And see neither of you again? No, definitely not."

"Why not?"

Why not? Good question, Hermione. Don't search your spreadsheet for the answer, Finn.

"Em,..."

Helena drew breath, willing him not to blow the answer. She'd forgive him anything, though would never admit it. On the other hand Hermione might appear to forgive, but secretly never would.

So answer Finn, dammit, and wisely,...

"Because,... there was a big whole in my life before I came here," he said. "I didn't know it. I just thought it was normal, like you do when something's hollowing out slowly over time. But you and Helena,... you've filled me up again. You are my life now. My life, whatever it is now, is *unthinkable* without you *both* in it."

But this was too much for Helena, a shade of Finn's silver tongue she did not trust: "What? You take piss, now?"

Hermione waved her down.

Finn shrugged. What else could he say? "What? No,..."

Hermione felt his admission coming at her like a warm wave and she basked in it.

Woa! Good answer, Finn.

"Okay,... there you go, Helena. He's not for runnin'. So, regardin' Finn's Irish passport, it puts us on warnin', right? It means we never give 'im

an excuse for wantin' to use it. That's my promise to you Finn. Helena, darlin? You promise Finn?"

"Of course, I promise." But Helena did not sound so earnest as Hermione, her affirmation soured by a remnant of her earlier peevishness.

Hermione let it go. "All right, glad that's sorted. Think I'm ready to move on to the wine, actually,... 'sept we'll not have enough with one bottle. What we got to say to each other now is 'appen better said totally pissed. I'll go get another,..." Hermione rose again, pointed her finger in warning. "If you can't make up, then at least promise me no more fightin' while I'm gone."

Helena turned her eyes away from him again as far as they would go, but left her hand upon the table within easy reach and hoped that he would take it. They listened to the rhythmic wash of waves for a while as the tide drew in, felt the sun on their skins. She tried to smile but it came out as a frown, deep in its moodiness.

"I've always known I am in love with you, Finn," she said. "It's only now I realise how much. Sorry for all this childishness."

Finn assessed the danger of entrapment, judged it safe, that while Helena was indeed soliciting sympathy, it was only so they could make amends - there was no other motive. He took her hand, pressed it, and she did not withdraw.

"Can't believe you said that."

"That I am in love with you? Or sorry for childishness. Both are true."

"No,... what you said to Hermione, about my passport, after saying you wouldn't."

"I did not say I wouldn't,... only that I would, if I had to. And I had to." She smiled then, managing at last to properly motivate the corners of her mouth. "Anyway, you forget. You run to Ireland, I am still fast girl come fetch you back. There is no escaping me Finn."

"I quite like the sound of that, actually."

Helena sighed, interlocked her fingers with his. "Good. And I like it when Hermione wears the trousers for us, don't you?"

Yes, yes Finn liked it. Helena was all crazy excitement, and breaking pots while Hermione was for calming down and tidying up again. He used to believe he was safe, neither he nor Helena in any danger from each other, because there was nothing he had that she wanted. He supposed the same applied to Helena and Hermione. Only now it was becoming clearer, through the fog of Helena's obscuring tangents, just what it was she wanted. And he was okay with it.

Yes, he could do that.

Chapter Ninety Three

What Nina didn't know was when Mulligan had said he'd "sort summat out", he'd already sorted it. And it was none of her business, what he'd sorted, mainly because what he'd sorted was the collection of the stuff, including her.

She would have been fine with him if she'd only done what he wanted, when he wanted, and as often as he'd wanted. That she didn't or hadn't was her fault. She'd had to to go and complicate things instead.

It would have been better if she'd been sitting prim and quiet, perhaps thinking she was waiting for him, when the bruisers from Manchester turned up for her. He wasn't sure if he'd blown that bit or not, but she'd sounded docile enough, and reckoned she was bluffing about taking off. After all she'd no friends in Carrickbar, and he'd given her money. She'd feel secure enough in that for a while, and she sounded sweet on him - just not in the right sort of way.

Bitch.

Next time he wanted a shag maybe he'd play safe and just pay for it like any sensible man. Or maybe after all, Maureen was more his speed, being all the more easily persuadable after a few drinks, and cheaper than paying for a whore. He'd no idea what that parting nonsense was over the boat, only that it probably meant nothing of any importance, and an hour from now it would make no difference anyway - all his problems would be solved - well except for the hole in his arse.

Sure, he was no use to anyone, not for a while at least - this being what he'd growled down the phone to the man who knew the man who knew the other man who knew the fixer. This was before he'd called Nina to smooth her over, get her to stay put. It was against protocol and a bit of a risk, but did they want the fuckin' stuff or not, 'cos he was stuck in hospital, his arse leaking through burst stitches if he so much as tried to fart, and if they wanted it they'd have to come and get it.

Squinty managed to ruffle feathers of course, as was his way. There were sinister mutterings about certain villains being disrespected by his tone, *but yes they wanted it.*

Vehicles were dispatched - ostentatious, flamboyantly huge Range Rovers with blacked out glass. There was a driver and two hard-men in each, plus a middle man's other man of middling intelligence in the

lead car. This was not on account of the dire importance of the mission, more that there was a new nightclub in Carlisle they were interested in visiting, and they could carry out a little business on the way, curry favour with the fixer and the fixer's men, and have some fun with the woman while they were at it.

They left Manchester at tea time, arrived in Carrickbar at eight, having first made a common sat-nav error and gone to Weston by mistake.

Nina was pulling on her rucksack and making for the door, having spent a while convincing herself she could actually do this, and running the plan through her head a few times. Before she reached the door, she heard the tapping. It was Finn perhaps, come to see how she was. She smiled at his kindness, the thought completely defusing her anger - still fizzing after her conversation with Mulligan. She would be sad to leave Finn without saying goodbye. Perhaps she could get word to him later that she was okay, not drowned after all.

But it wasn't Finn.

"Ah,... M'dear?"

"Yes?"

She was puzzled by the presence of a tall, tweedy man, quite elderly, like a comic-book colonel from the British Empire, with his clipped moustache and ramrod back.

"I'm Lionel," said Lionel. "Friend of Finn's."

"Ah! Lionel,... friend of Finn's. I am,... very happy to meet you."

"Yes,... yes, likewise. Look, none of my business and all that but, well, Finn sort of outlined your predicament, and I just wondered,..."

"Predic-a-ment?"

"Yes,... em vis-a-vis, you know who and you know what?"

"I'm sorry, Lionel? What?"

"Oh, Lord, never was any good at breaking the ice."

Lionel had been thinking long and hard following his conversation with

Finn that afternoon, and Nina's story had troubled him deeply, roused him to action. He wanted her to know for sure she had,... *options.* Finn was a dear fellow but sometimes his head moved at a snail's pace to say nothing of currently seeming bound up in odd romantic fantasies that could only end in disaster.

So,... there he was, wondering what to say next.

It was Nina who saw the cars approaching along the promenade in slow, sinister convoy. They were difficult to miss, difficult not to recognise from her previous dealings, including a virtual kidnapping from the quay side at Hull, six months earlier. It came to her in an instant then, Squinty's betrayal. It was all lost. They'd be on the doorstep in seconds and she'd be gone once more in a squeal of rubber, and worse, this poor old guy, friend of Finn's, was in the way and would probably get hurt.

Meanwhile it was obvious to Lionel the girl was distracted. "Em,... are you all right?"

The cars made a fussy pulling up, but in their greed for the guns they had decided Nina was of secondary importance, hadn't even seen her or thought to look for the garage. Doors flew open and the big bruiser with the purple scar stepped out like a mob-movie terminator. The sight of him was too much for Nina who, remembering their last encounter, wet herself.

What? What was he saying now?

His hand,... it was touching her arm. She threw it off. Who was he again, this Lionel? No,... she couldn't go back. Things had been so idyllic here.

What to do?

Step back, slam the door, barricade herself in?

The middleman's man and the hard men were milling about on the harbour wall, looking over, looking down, planning, thinking, scheming - at least as best they could given the limited brain-power at their disposal. But what they lacked in intelligence they more than made up for with self confidence and their time-proven untouchability.

The tide was in, she thought. The boat would be bobbing about on it's

mooring and they'd not be sure how to get aboard, maybe not even sure which boat it was.

"My car," he was saying. "The red one. Quick as you can, dear. Bold as you like."

"What?"

"You clearly have only an instant to decide if you can trust me or not."

Lionel turned then, levered his cap down securely, walked slowly back towards the Alvis, one eye on the visitors by the harbour. They were distracted, paying him no attention. He wasn't sure if he'd read things right, if he was making a spy novel out of a romance, but time would tell.

Nina came past him, briskly, ferret-like, slid smoothly into the back of the car, lay across the footwells, out of sight.

Lionel got in as quickly and as discretely as he could. The Alvis burbled to life and pulled away smoothly, ghost-like in the fast fading evening light. He kept a beady eye on the rear-view, waited until the first bend took the scene before flooring the accelerator. The Alvis seemed to remember it possessed more horsepower than it was used to using, sat down on its axles and gave a growl, then made haste for Channing House.

"Em,.. I take it they weren't friends of yours?"

Lionel wasn't sure of the etiquette in such a situation, other than politeness. Nina didn't answer right away. She was having difficulty suppressing a trembling and a sobbing at the shock, at the indignity, the humiliation and finally the miracle,... if this indeed was a miracle and not some twisted insult on behalf of fate, that Lionel, polite and bumbling, and genteel, was in fact a silver haired sadistic killer in the employ of the criminal underworld.

Surely not?

"You are really friend of Finn's, Mr Lionel?"

"Yes,... I think you're safe to sit more comfortably now. We're not being followed." *He'd always wanted to say that! We're not being followed!*

"Thank you, but I will spoil your car seat. I am, embarrassing to myself,.."

"Ah, oh,... Lord,... em,... well, there's a blanket on the parcel shelf. You could perhaps wrap yourself in that. Spare your,... em,.. dignity."

"My,... dignity? Did you say *dignity, Lionel?""*

"Absolutely m'dear."

Nina began to laugh then, something hysterical in it, and she couldn't stop.

Lionel checked the rear view from time to time. The Alvis wasn't exactly inconspicuous. Better get it home and under cover in case the ne-er-do-wells came prowling in their graveyard tanks. They'd probably ask at the King James first. They'd all had the look of sour beer about them. Hopefully that would be the end of it, so long as they'd found what they were looking for down at the harbour. He decided it best not to ask what that was, and was entirely trusting in Finn's word Nina was as innocent in all of this as he'd assumed.

"Perhaps you could, em,.. lay low for a while at my place. And we'll give Finn a ring. See what we can work out."

"Yes. That will be,... lovely, Mr Lionel. Thank you."

Nina wrapped the blanket around her and sat, burning with humiliation, embarrassment and discomfort. But it was better all of that, she reasoned, than squashed between a pair of bruisers on the road to who knows where. If she ever saw Squinty Mulligan again, and she had a knife handy, and she thought she could get away with it,....

That big dick,...

Was definitely coming off!

Chapter Ninety Four

Hermione returned with another bottle of wine and glasses, set them down with a tinkle upon the cloth, looked out to sea - so tranquil now, it was perfect, the scene, the mood, the way she felt, and both her lovers compliant, docile, sitting there holding hands, looking to her for resolution.

Resolution, Minnie?

Well, obviously it was a night away in a hotel together, and though she could not have imagined thinking such a thing even yesterday, if they would not organise it themselves, she'd damned well do it for them. The sooner they got that over with the better for all of them.

Both her Lovers?

Seems so, Minnie.

Who would have believed it?

Looks like she'd not be needing fresh batteries for My Hardy again. Ever!

Okay, so,...

She opens the bottle, yanks the cork out with a triumphant pop, pours the glasses. It's cheap stuff and Helena will most likely pull a face, so their next little soiree will have to be round her place, at her cost - if there ever is another. Drunk or not, what they've still got to say to each other is dangerous and there could be casualties, but she's also keenly aware she promised Finn, once, everything would be all right, and she's daring to hope again there's a chance she might still pull it off. It's just that what looks to be the solution to the puzzle is the last thing any of them would have thought of.

She looks at them, at Finn's hand upon Helena's and feels the slightly weird sweetness of it. No, they're not well matched, wouldn't last five minutes on their own, but it's clear to Hermione they both want things to be different - Helena wanting to want what Finn has to offer, and Finn wanting to do anything for her without fear of getting burned and abandoned. No, it would never have worked, not in the real world, at least not without Hermione to provide moderation. But this wasn't the real world any more. The real world had abandoned them to their own

devices. This was *their* world now, and in it they needed her as much as she needed them, for anything to work at all.

As she and Helena needed Finn.

She watches them for a while, oblivious and comfortable in the silence, and she allows herself a smile at the simple pleasure of it, then clears her throat: "Ahem,.. sorry to break this up," she says. Both then remember her presence, wait patiently on her for the next move.

"Helena and I made love, Finn," she says. This seems to wake them, bring them back to reality.

Finn nods, calm acceptance, or is it resignation? She cannot tell. Doesn't matter.

"Yes. I know," he says.

Helena shrugs, matter of fact or dismissive? Doesn't matter. "Already I have told him this," she says.

Okay, that's fine, but Hermione wants Finn under no illusions: "It weren't no quick bonk, nor fumble, neither, okay?" She is very clear in this, no sweeping of pernickerty details under the rug. "I mean,... did you tell him that too, Helena? How beautiful it was?"

Helena folds her hands away to safety. "I may have spared him the poetry, darling."

"Poetry?" *Yes, Hermione, it was poetic*. "No need to have spared him though, is there, Finn? I mean,... Finn likes a bit of poetry."

Finn wonders. Does it make things more dangerous, or less, that there had been poetry? Had there been poetry in Richard and Kathleen's furtive couplings all those years? He prefers to think not. On balance he realises he prefers the thought of poetry between Helena and Hermione, because it implies less by way of theft.

"No need to spare me any details," he says. "I'm glad it was like that. I mean,... the way you described at first, when you were sounding me out,... it sounded a bit,... cold, actually. Little better than doing it for yourself."

Hermione smiled, thought of Mr Hardy, again. Raised a glass to the

banishment of a permanently false erection, one she no longer needed. "Okay,... shall we drink to our engagement, then?"

Finn and Helena at the same time, thinking they've misheard: "To what?"

"Well, don't mean marriage or nothin' *obviously*. That might be a bit tricky, even in these weird times. No,... I mean... engaged to each other, right? You want to be with us, Finn? Me and Helena?"

He could see she was serious in this, something solemn in her words, which implied there must be something binding in his answer.

With her and Helena? "Yes. Absolutely."

"And Helena? You'll be with me and Finn?"

"Sure. I will be with you."

"That's settled then. As for you and him you got a lot of work to do, and you can either do it behind my back or in my bed with me supervisin'. Either's fine, but the sooner you work out how you're going to do it and on what terms, and finally get laid, the pair of you, the better for all of us. Right?"

Helena was unimpressed. "Hermione, please! That's disgusting."

"The wine? But you in't tasted it yet."

"No,... Finn and I,... we will be doing no such thing. We have already discussed this. It is,... at best,... a very delicate matter between us."

A delicate matter?

They'd discussed it, yes, but Finn's recollection was somewhat different, that it was something she wanted, expected even,... just not all of them together, at the same time. So, okay, they had discussed it, it was just that he couldn't remember if they were supposed to be imagining it or not, or if Helena was really expecting this of him.

Or not.

What?

Inwardly, he groans at his own incompetence.

Are they not a little old be jumping so far off the rails as this? Or is it only tnow they're mature enough? Pragmatism and romance?

Hermione turns down the corners of her mouth, resisting the smile. "You mean you can't do it while I'm watchin'? Pity. I was lookin' forward to it actually."

It's Finn's turn to rise in panic. "Em,... look, I should go,..."

Hermione waves him down. "Poor joke, sorry. Don't go, Darlin', please."

Helena teases: "Oh? When I want to go, I get pointy finger and sharp words. Finn gets soft voice and darlins." She eases herself to her feet, wincing, pressing a palm to her back. "So instead, I go,.. visit ladies room."

"You okay?"

"Hot," she says. "I take deep breaths and splash face with cold water. This conversation is exhausting. And makes me horny, which is very confusing."

"You're sure you're okay?"

"Hermione, darling, is ruse,.. I make excuse then you say to Finn what you need to say that is not for my ears also. I am discrete in this."

"But there's nothin' not for your ears, Helena,.."

"Maybe you think so, but my presence holds you back. You have ten minutes. Then we take walk along beach, arm in arm. All three of us. Get back to reality of love affair between confused and orphaned middle aged adults, and away from eternal obfuscating bullshit of sex."

Obfuscating?

They watch her leave, Hermione thinking: *am I middle aged?* Finn notices how she walks, her upright grace a struggle now unless taken cautiously and with effort. *The eternal bullshit of sex?* He and Hermione exchange looks, read minds, wonder if another crisis is approaching. Helena has been complaining more often of aches,

holding herself gingerly, but they resist projecting those thoughts any further.

It's Hermione who changes the subject. "Remember that first morning in the cafe? When you came in for coffee?"

"Seems like five minutes ago."

"Fancied you rotten from that moment, you know?"

"You did?"

"Absolutely. Then she comes in, all airs and graces, lightin' the room up like she always does, and from then on you only 'ad eyes for her."

"That's not true, not entirely. I,..."

"Oh, come on!"

"All right, but we were never,... "

"I know. Old story, I suppose. What I mean is, I always wanted to hate her, 'cos of guilt, 'cos I couldn't help Kyle out with a job. Silly really. And all the time I'm callin' her names behind her back, she's wantin' to know me, to love me. And finally, gettin' to know her, I realise how wonderful she is,... and now,... seeing how you are together,... I mean you're both so lovely, but you'd be hopeless as a couple on your own and you both know it, but you still want it."

"No, you said it: hopeless. *We'd be hopeless*."

"But in other ways you'd be brilliant together, and I'd really like to see that. You love her Finn. You want her to be happy, you want to make her problems your problems. Mine too. That's love. And I don't care what anyone else says, how they define it or judge it or anythin',... and there's somethin' else you should know: you can cut the air with a knife when you're both in the same room. And maybe if I wasn't so perverted I'd be offended by that, but turns out I'm not offended at all, turns out I'm really excited by it. And in my book, the sooner you do it, then sooner we can all move on to just,.. like she said, cutting out the bullshit of sex, and working out the important bit."

"The *important* bit?"

"How to be together for the rest of our lives. How to,... wake up one day and be old,.. and still together, all three of us, and still in love. That would really be somethin', wouldn't it?"

Finn hides his face in his hands, tries to rub some sense into his temples: "It's like an,.. imaginary thing though,... me and her."

"Call it what you want, but it seems we all three crossed a line somewhere without knowin' it. Yet here's the thing, Finn, and this is what I've got to say to you before she comes back and it's this: we might not have her for much longer. You seen how she is. She's in pain again, and grittin' her teeth through it. And if the worst comes, it's down to us to pick up the pieces."

"But,... we're going to get her through this,... and she'll be fine. I refuse to consider any other option."

"I want to believe that too. But, a part of me wonders if this is just her own way of seein' herself out. And if it should come to the worst, are you prepared to do what she wants, to be what all this is about for her, this story she's weavin'?"

"Story?"

"You know? You'll be Kyle's father, and me his mother."

"We've talked about this before, and yes. I'm okay with that,... but,..."

"But?"

"Friends would do the same. I don't see the need for this elaborate plotting."

"Me neither, but that's what it boils down to for her. That's why she's so pissed with you and that Irish passport, and me too, if I'm honest. So if you're going, go, then it's least 'ard feelin's all round."

"I told you, I'm not going anywhere."

Hermione closes her eyes, tight, crushes her lips together in self loathing. "Listen to me! Got no right to be pissed. Not after what we done behind your back. I'm sorry Finn."

"It's okay."

"No it's not. I didn't see it comin'. Not like this. But I'm not saying I don't wannit neither, now I've got it."

"I know. Helena's sorry too. We're all sorry. But really, there's no need. I mean, who the fuck cares any more?"

"But it don't feel right,... you bein' so,..."

"What? Passive? Like I couldn't care less?"

"Yes. Thought you cared more than that."

"I do care. Obviously. It's just,... it seems to me that while we're all three sorry over something, what we're really stuck on is worrying about how we *should* feel, while skipping over how we *actually*,... feel when we're all together."

"Which is what?"

"Well, if tonight's anything to go by, and we can get past the angst and the guilt and the confusion, we're all obviously,... incredibly, stupidly happy."

She laughs. "Well,... okay,.. except for the stupid bit, there in't no stupid about it, Finn."

"Okay, not stupid. I know being with you is always amazing, and makes everything worthwhile. Same with Helena. I could live anywhere, even a beaten up run down seaside town, on the edge of nowhere, like this, since you're both here too. But tell me something, because I'm a bit dim and I need it spelling out in simple words: am I okay still thinking of you as,... well, wanting me,... in *every* way."

"Oh, Finn, Darlin',... yes."

"I just,..."

"What?"

"Don't know how to relate to Helena, knowing she has the same,.. well,.. privileged access to you."

"Posh way of puttin' it. You were relatin' pretty well just now. I'd say

start with that and move on gradually, and don't feel guilty about it. If there's three of us in this now that means there's still one orgasm missing. And nobody's going to feel better about that than me, when it's comes. You and she need to get away somewhere nice and get laid, clear the air. Better for all three of us."

"Trying to be serious."

"No,.. don't be serious. When we make love, Finn, it's funny, and sweet, and I'm smilin' all day afterwards. I guess that makes it serious between us, but not all frowny-serious, like we're being now. This is just the beginnin'. Right? So let's have a laugh, and if this is Helena's last six months of livin' let's see if we can't paint a smile on her face too. I mean,..."

Hermione bites off her words when she sees Helena returning. Helena stands in the doorway, phone in hand, looking perplexed. "Neither of you answer 'phone?"

"Em, switched off," says Finn. "Didn't want interrupting. What's up?"

Hermione is puzzled. "Mine's off too. What's the problem? You okay?"

"Darling, please it will become tedious if you keep asking me this like I am consumptive maiden in Victorian novel. No, it is Lionel. He asks if you and Finn will call at earliest convenience. I ask if there is anything I can do, since I thought we were friends now, but he makes noises of apology. Why do I frighten men, Finn?"

"Em,... how long have you got?"

Hermione stands suddenly to get a better view of something over Finn's shoulder. "Darlin', look. Is that,... the garage?"

Finn turns to see a column of smoke, thick and ominous. The garage? It could be. He moves out through the gate and a little way along the beach for a better view. There are flames.

It's the garage, yes.

Then he's running like he cannot remember running before. The motion is jarring to him, and he keeps tripping over the sand, tugging his phone from his pocket as he goes. Hermione didn't know he had such swiftness in him, clumsy though it is. She has kicked off her

shoes, hitched up her dress, and is now sprinting after him, catches up long before he's made it to the harbour wall, takes his arm,..

"Finn, darlin? Slow down. What's the panic?"

"Nina," he says.

"Nina?"

They come up the steps to the promenade, Finn with his knees burning, bits of sea-shell stinging Hermione's bare feet, slowing her down. The workshop is alight, also the house beyond it, flames curling from blackened windows. How can a fire take hold so quickly? They can feel the heat from across the road, Hermione keeps a hand clamped around Finn's arm, fears he's going to rush in. He looks stricken.

"Finn! Darlin',... don't do anything stupid now," and then: "Phone!"

"What?"

"Your 'phone's ringin'."

"Eh? Oh,.. Hello?"

"Finn, is me."

He settles back against the harbour wall, a weight suddenly lifted. Hermione feels him relax.

"Nina!"

And Hermione is thinking: *After the day he's had, Nina can rouse this much energy from him?*

"I'm with Lionel," says Nina. "There are men looking for me." She sounds tearful. "Is Mulligan, bastard. He betrays me."

"Okay, stay there. I'm coming."

Finn closes his eyes for a moment, thanks Heaven, or fate, or God,... or whatever. Crowds are gathering, an excited air about them, an air of festival, no sense of alarm at the conflagration. Squinty is well known as a rogue, and the assumption is the fire has been arranged for

insurance purposes. There is even amusement, shaking of heads in begrudging admiration of his shiftiness. What this country needs is more independently minded men like Squinty! Men who can wag their fingers at authority and say,....

Fffff,....

It's been a long day for Finn, but it's not over yet.

"She's okay," he says.

"Well,... that's good. Em,... want me to come with you?"

"Please. Better fetch Helena too. I think we're going to need her,... gift for imagining ways around the impossible."

They walk back along the beach towards the Sea View, Helena walking up to meet them. She and Hermione exchange a look, a flicker of confirmation, the facts of which, regarding Finn, are not yet clear, but which by now they know to be true all the same.

He's a good man, capable of unflinching devotion, but easily distracted as to where that devotion lies, and it's going to take them both to keep him focused.

Chapter Ninety Five

"Finn loves women," says Helena. "All women". She enters the bedroom from the en-suite wearing ivory silk pyjamas. She is smoothing the last of the moisturiser into her palms and the backs of her hands while she thinks about it some more.

"It is romantic affliction perhaps. And only later does he discover we are not princesses endowed with magical powers, but human beings with inconvenient moods, and periods. All men are the same. Few realise this truth in their own lifetimes, and thank God or we would be sunk for babies!"

Hermione lies on her side upon the duvet in bra and pants, her head propped on one hand, watching Helena. "So?"

Helena folds down the duvet, slides under it as if it were a skill in grace learned at finishing school. "So, he sees a little of his princess in Nina. That is all there is to this business."

"And the rest in Carina?"

"No,... a little bit also. All right, more than Nina perhaps, but most of all it rests in us now. We take greater part of his fantasies. Sure. It is Finn's release from prison of poisoned marriage that makes him realise this love for all women. Now, do you tease me with that body all night, or do you cover it with nightdress and we get some sleep?"

"I'll shower first. I smell like the griddle."

"Nightdress is in top drawer. Take your pick, but I think I would like you in red satin and lace. Spare toothbrush in bathroom. And you don't smell of the griddle, Hermione, unless griddle smells like earth and sex. And I'm afraid this does not ever wash off from you."

"Give over, you mad, posh tart."

"Oh? Posh is it? In addition to madness now?"

"And we're not sleepin',... not yet. I want a good long cuddle of you in those pyjamas while we drift off. Okay?"

Helena watches as Hermione makes for the shower, unhooking her bra as she goes, then pauses as if she can feel eyes upon her. She

turns. "We'll never keep 'im, that's what I'm sayin'. In spite of everythin' we said tonight. Talk all we like, it's somethin' else that drives us to action, and we don't know what it is. He talks like he's smitten with us both, but he could just as soon leg it. Carina? Nina? These are just his lovers in waitin'. And that passport business,..."

"So, do we care? Do we actually need him?"

"Accordin' to your story we do. Yes, course we need him. We love him. He,... completes somethin' in both of us. We'd be good together, the three of us. We'd be happy. I know we would. I just never dared think it before."

"You think he doesn't mean it when he says how much he loves us?"

"Thinks he means it, I'm sure, just like you do, but if that's true then why's he across town in bed on his own, instead of here with us?"

"Is just as well, or I need bigger bed, Hermione. And you know I find the idea distasteful. As does he. Finn and I we must have our lovers one at a time. Also what if person in middle wants toilet in night? They disturb everybody."

Hermione gives a snort. "Toilet? Hadn't thought of that. No, you're right, that would be a pain. But anyway, you know what I mean."

"All right, so maybe it's because you kissed him in the car when we came back from Lionel's house, and you said good night to him like full stop to story cut short."

"Well, he looked done in, like he needed to sleep. Just wish he hadn't looked so relieved when I said it."

"In his position, and at his age, after the day he's had, invitation to coffee and fear of etcetera with the two of us, at the same time, I would be relieved also. Indeed I *am* relieved. Let him sleep, recover energy. Tomorrow is another day for,... etceteras. But one at a time, please. Okay? On this I insist. Absolute. And is your turn with him, I think."

"Yea, but you int had a turn yet, Helena."

Helena sighs. "You know how I am conflicted over this. And my back is troublesome."

"Okay."

"Also Kyle is down the hall. We make less noise as snoring twosome, you and I. And easier to explain."

"Is it? Hadn't really thought about that, about what anyone else might think, especially Kyle,... and Anica. Just what are we goin' to say to them, about,... all of this?"

"Truth. I find the young have fewer problems with variety of human experience. Everyone else of course can go to hell. It is only adults, screwed up by their own past who get weird and are best ignored."

"All right." Hermione slides open the drawer for a nightdress. There's plain cotton or the red satin with lace. She would love to try the satin against her skin, but would rather not give the impression of an easy compliance, so chooses the cotton. "I'm worried he'll disappear, that's all. What we're askin's too much,... too complicated for 'im."

"Still want simple story, Hermione? Simple happy ever afters?"

"It's not what I want, darlin'. It's what Finn's capable of adjustin' to."

"Sure, I know. So we forget him. This will work, I think. You and I. You are so sweet, Hermione. Nothing makes me happier than this moment looking at you. So,... for us, all things are possible. Meanwhile, Finn drifts away to simple solution - to Carina maybe? Yes, this is still the most likely of futures for him. It is conventional, based on normal reckoning."

"Normal reckoning?"

"Normal rules. But I refuse it, and why? Because is not correct for him. We don't understand love any more. Is why it goes wrong all the time. Is not about possession of person for exclusive sex bullshit. We are not simple ending, you and I. We are impossible, but sometimes the impossible is better for everyone, if we can manage it, and if we have the imagination."

"Has he though? The imagination, I mean. Not sure I've got it neither. That's why we're drawn to you. You got it in spades."

Oh, Minnie!

What she'd really have liked more than anything tonight was him in the room with them at that moment, though she knows he and Helena have serious hangups about it, and she's not sure, beyond patience, she can shift them much in that direction. Still, she imagines him sitting on the futon, watching her, Helena in bed like that, all silky and serene in her possession of the both of them. They would make a sandwich of her, Hermione's head upon her right shoulder, Finn's upon her left, and both electrified by the feel of her, and each other, and they would all three drift off into heaven.

She feels sad of a sudden.

To slip away holding Helena tonight will be a sweet comfort for sure, but an ending without Finn will always be lacking resolution.

Lacking a final consummation.

Lacking an orgasm Minnie?

The bullshit of sex?

Oh,... shut up, will you!

While Hermione showers, Helena pops a painkiller, swallows it back with a glass of water, then thinks over the latter part of the evening, on the impressive and imposing Englishness of Lionel's house, and of Nina, a much smaller woman than she'd imagined, given the stories she's heard of her slaying salivating hounds armed only with a kitchen knife.

She was huddled in a corner of the sofa, as if shrunken by her experience. And what Helena saw when she'd looked at Nina was a woman abused, humiliated, stripped of the last vestiges of dignity, as Helena had been once and never would be again. Helena was beyond insult now, unassailable. Meanwhile Finn and Lionel had merely sighed, looked anxious. Lionel had sat and tapped his knee, and Finn paced unhelpfully while Nina recounted her story, eyes red rimmed, but tears held back behind a pale and steely mask. Hermione had looked from one to the other, delegated responsibility for crisis management to Helena, and made tea.

Solutions to the dilemma of Nina eluded everyone, except for Helena, for whom the solution was obvious.

She'd sat opposite Nina, feeling ever more delicate in her back, secretly pining for her bed. Nina had picked up on the stillness and an understanding had passed between them. That Mulligan had brought devils to Carrickbar would be upon his own head soon enough, indeed might already have been so if the fate of the garage was anything to go by. The last they'd heard the fire brigade was still damping it all down, that the garage and the house were gutted. Why they'd done that was unclear. Perhaps Mulligan had insulted them - easy to imagine. Or it was to burn Nina out of any safe refuge - on the mistaken assumption there was nothing about her that would appeal to decent people, that she might have friends amongst them who would help her. She had already charmed Finn, and Lionel, and neither of these men were fools.

It could only be hoped the devils did not make a habit of calling on Carrickbar, but they would have no reason if Nina could be got rid of, and Mulligan too.

Nina's departure would be handled with compassion of course, and guarantees for her survival because she deserved that much. As for Mulligan, Helena could not care less, but having been burned out of a home, she could not see him being in any hurry to return, at least if he knew what was good for him. And unlike Nina, he would discover he had few real friends here for lack of investment in them.

Finally, she'd looked to Finn. It was he who had invited her, he who had obviously felt she'd something to offer the situation, but he would have to spell it out, what he wanted. She had told him once he had only to ask, and she would make it happen.

Anything.

So,...

How shall I help you Finn?

And what shall I expect in return?

"Finn, darling?"

"We need a plan, Helena."

She sighed. "Yes. We must also get Nina out of Carrickbar. You will excuse me a moment?"

She stepped outside, needed to think she said. Took out her phone and made the ultimate sacrifice - her pride - and phoned her husband. "Hello darling is me. You sound surprised. I know, but don't worry, is strictly business. You listening?... Okay,..."

___

Hermione emerges from the en-suite, smiling, still a little shy. She remembers the first loan of clothing from Helena, a bath robe, and how strange it had made her feel. The nightdress makes her feel the same way, only now she knows what the feeling is, that of being wrapped in Helena, which is fine if you believe in her. And Hermione does.

Completely.

"You look ravishing, darling,"says Helena, teasing.

The nightdress is long and a little on the tight side, so Hermione has to take shorter steps than usual, like a Geisha. "Shurrup and lemme in."

Helena folds back a triangle of duvet and Hermione slides in, lays her head upon Helena's shoulder, sighs at the exquisite feel of her. "You okay? Sorry,... stop askin' Tell me what you're thinkin' instead."

"I'm thinking we should encourage Anica a little more. She is nice girl, but seems to lack courage, at least where Kyle is concerned."

"Well, we both know why that is."

"Hmm. I should invite her for chit-chat perhaps? Be more myself, and charming, you think?"

"No, whatever you do, don't be yourself, or we'll not see her for dust. If you're serious, let me think on it, okay?"

"Okay. And Finn." It was not a question.

"Hmm? Finn?"

"I am thinking of Finn also. You know, there is an old saying, that whatever we are meant to keep, we cannot lose, even if we send it away. And what is not meant for us to keep, we are bound to lose, no matter how hard we try to hold on to it."

"Okay,...." It sounds like Hermione's thinking on it, but she's merely drowsy of a sudden, sinking fast through layers of heat and softness. It is this simple contact and the trusting comfort of another that truly completes her. Helena waits for Hermione's reply, then she can expound further on her philosophical solutions to the connundrum of Finn Finucane, but it's slow in coming.

Hermione manages only a semi-conscious and mumbled "Love you, darlin." and then she's gone, purring softly into sweet oblivion.

She works too hard this one, burns bright all day, goes out like a light when it's done, unless she's up for sex, which tonight she obviously is not. Helena sighs, a little disappointed. She eases Hermione aside, lowers her head gently to the pillow, kisses her brow, snuggles down into her heat.

"So, Munchinkin, is clear to me now. We send him away to the land of his dreams. But first, you are right. Is time I sleep with him."

Two birds, same stone.

Make it or break it, Helena.

Chapter Ninety Six

Mid August now, high tide. Finn looks out over the bay at the wide curling breakers rising green and transparent from the deep blue of the Atlantic. It was a long drive after an overnight crossing from Liverpool, and he's glad now to be finally touching down.

Ireland!

Bundoran is not what he expected. It's rather a maze of streets cradling a broad bay, an eclectic mix of the modern, the defiantly old, the new, the half built and the decrepit, not unlike Carrickbar in some respects, but far from it in others. There are the remnants of flimsy amusement arcades from the seventies, boarded up now, tag splattered, some half bulldozed, while in the same breath there are sprawling developments of newly built holiday homes and apartments, a reminder of the pre-crash tiger days.

The hotel is around the headland somewhere, a traditional white rendered place dating from the times of British rule. But for now he's come down to the promenade, to walk, to take in the unfamiliar light. There are hills, higher, greener, and more dramatically folded than at Carrickbar. It's quiet just now, but judging by the mass of parking bays, it's a more often visited resort than home.

Did he say home?

The road signs have been bilingual since the border - English and Gaelic - and this adds to the strangeness. Whatever happens post BREXIT, and whatever solutions they come up with for that border, this will always be Europe.

He does not feel like a native returnee, how can he? though his new passport suggests he is. But his father was from Wexford, on the opposite coast, the one facing England, not here, facing out into the infinity of the wild Atlantic, only America beyond. Identities. All these things are labels of identity, the things others judge you by, and he thought he'd rejected them, shaken them off, but feels them settling back upon him as soon as he is still for more than a moment.

We are what we are - not what others say we are.

So what are you, Finn?

Dickhead?

Waster?

Coward?

The air is bracing, the sky looking like it might turn any time from blue to black. There's a cafe along the way. A dark haired woman behind the counter - engaging smile. She looks up from her pad as he enters, appears glad to see him. She has pale skin, piercings in her nose and brow, spiked hair. Her appearance stalls him.

Do they still call that,... goth?

"So,... what can I get you darlin'?"

Irish lilt and a fast tongue, deft with the syllables. He'll be a while getting the hang of that.

"Americano, please. Black, no sugar?"

He adds the question mark, wondering if the Irish have become as pretentious over their coffee as everywhere else. It seems they have. She bangs the scoop, makes steam.

Whooosh!

"I'll bring it over she says."

She does not comment on his Englishness, so he concludes he must not stick out as much as he imagines, or at least as much as he feels, or fears. There's a welcome in her manner, but no little biscuit on the side - no airs in Bundoran, then. That's fine. Finn does not want any.

Okay.

His mood rises at last through the fog of his travel fatigue, and he decides he's going to like it here.

"Thanks."

He sets his phone down on the table as if waiting for a call, but does not sink into it, is not tempted to check for messages, nor flick listlessly - no point - the 'phone's been roaming since the border, and the clouds

have sucked all the credit from it as the thing decided to update itself. The last he'd heard of the outside world was from Carina, days ago, the enquiry into her conduct having found in her favour. She'd quit the same day of course, put a deposit down on a flat in Dublin. She was Irish now, still European, like him, he supposed.

Still European? Yes, still the maroon passport that would fast-track him to the future, rather the blue that would have him stuck in a slow lane to the past. He looks out at the sparkle of the sea while he thinks about this. The sea is something else here: cleaner, deeper, wider, and there's a broader rhythm to the waves.

Good for her, he's thinking, though it does not bode well so many of those capable of plugging the holes are jumping ship, leaving only the managerials to run around with nothing to manage any more but themselves. All mouth and no trousers.

She'd ended by sending him her new address, and asking after his love-life of course.

Where to begin?

Hell!

He takes a breath, as memories of those last weeks in England return to him.

"So,... darling. I will kiss you now?"

Helena! Bright, scalding, sensual.

"Em,... if you like."

They are sitting on the balcony of the bridal suite at the Coleridge Hotel, looking out over the rooftops. There are high-summer crowds milling on the street below: Ambleside in full-on tourist season, English Lakes. Europeans, Far Eastern, American, all come to take advantage of the collapse of Sterling.

It amuses her - the Bridal Suite! Hermione had booked it, no doubt on purpose to tease. She will pretend to scold on their return.

Green mountains, evening rose tinted, rise beyond the old town, scent of wood burners, scent too of the aftershave she has bought him,

thinking he will wear it at dinner tonight. He already is, happy to be shaped by a degree to her design, but not so far he no longer recognises himself.

So be careful, Helena!

Appearances for Finn are flexible, and unimportant. More important is he feels guilty, being with her,... like this.

Like what, Finn?

Well,... like an unfaithful husband. Hermione and Kyle and Annie are working at the Sea View, just him and Helena away now, for the night.

For the night!

He can't remember how he was persuaded to agree to that. And it was Hermione who had done most of the persuading, as if pimping him out: *Helena needs a break, not been away in ages, nice hotel, nice restaurant,...*

And one room is cheaper than two.

As for Helena and that one room: *I will have period, Finn, so sleep only and no touching.*

Okay?

Sure, fine - I mean, he'd slept for years with Kathleen without ever once even thinking of it.

Thinking of what?

You know,... *it!*

Okay, so,...

She leans across and he presents his cheek for the peck, but she takes his cheeks gently in her palms, turns his head and takes the mouth, eyes closed, and deep,... the French way.

Finn can hear the breakers thundering now, the excited squeal of a child on the swings in the playground, his heart banging once more at the memory of that kiss. Such things are surely meant for youth, the

memory a cushion to sink back upon in the wilderness of later years, and to kid yourself your life ever meant a damn. But no, the emotions are still there, throughout, only suppressed by disappointment, all the more the longer we live. But more than this her kiss lights up a corner inside of him, gifts him the idea he might yet be on the threshold of a revelation regarding the nature of love.

Oh, really, Finn?

They had swum in the hotel pool, a snug subterranean grotto, softly lit. She'd thought it might ease her back for later. It had not. She says nothing for fear of worrying him, doesn't need to - he sees how she struggles. He remembers her now, in a red one-piece, the exquisite line and proportion of her body as she sits, poolside, her legs lazily cycling clear waters, golden hair spilling around her shoulders.

It's getting worse, the pain, more enduring, the hardship of basic mobility attacking her natural grace day by day. He calculates her appointment is still some weeks away, is braced for the letter that will postpone it at the last minute. She will have to play it up, he warns her, feign incapacity, suicidal thoughts even, for that is how things work in a system where scant resource is rationed out to nothing.

But Helena will do no such thing.

It will be,... *undignified, darling! I take chance in line with everyone else, like proper British Citizen!*

He stirs his coffee now, takes a sip. It's hot and strong but has also the taint of something queer about it. It reminds him of the garden centre and that last rather stiff meeting with Kathleen. He wonders where she is now, and if she ever thinks of him, wonders if she can imagine him sitting here at last,... in Ireland, realises she would not understand, nor less care what any of this means to him at all.

Well, do you see it, Finn?

I see it, Dad.

"So, Finn," says Helena. "Last time I saw Hermione she has wound up her father's watch."

"Really?" Finn is moved by the news. It had always seemed to him as if she were carrying around an unnecessary burden of guilt over her

father's death. "That's,... wonderful. It means something,... doesn't it?"

Helena nods. "It means she moves on. A thing like that, it takes some altitude for it to be viewed in proper perspective. She accepts back a part of herself that was frozen. This is thanks to us, I think, and all we do for her."

"Moving on?"

"Yes, and speaking of moving on, it make sense now for you to move in. Give up rent on Elm Street, put money into business instead of Lionel's pension?"

Made sense? Since when? And to whom?

"Well,... Hermione's flat's rather small, Helena,..."

She smiles. "Oh yes, far too small. But you misunderstand. I mean move in with me. Hermione's flat is cosy for a while, but cosy can become irritating when she wants to watch soap and you want to tinker with little watches. She and I have already discussed this." She gives a mock shudder. "Ugghhh,... soap. No, that would not work at all."

"I'm sorry? Did you say move in with you?"

They'd actually discussed this?

"I have spare room, big with en-suite, minimal style, like you prefer. Also smaller room, adjoining with sea view for studies, and little watches. Is presently full of boxes, all of it junk from past life. You will clear out for me. Is big house Finn, like this bed, you do not even know I am in it."

"Em,..."

Helena ignores the hesitation, ploughs on: "Is perfect. Hermione has both lovers under same roof. She chooses who to sleep with, though how we choose is yet to be decided. Is still complicated matter but move in right direction. As for more certain matters, Kyle will be thrilled to have you around. So,... you want or no?"

Actually, he did want. There'd been a time not long ago when he'd thought sharing a house with Helena would drive him mad, and it still might. It sounded utterly perverse, but heavenly all the same, so why

did he reject it? "That's the craziest thing I've ever heard. I don't suppose by any chance you're still on those painkillers?"

"Maybe. But importance is,... you want or no?"

"Can I,... think about it?"

Pah! Think, think, think, Finn.

As business partners they had begun researching the variety of camping pods, from the monastic to the palatial. They had begun at opposite ends of the spectrum and worked in to a surprisingly genial compromise between style and frugality. Finn had expected more of a fight from her, and she had expected less of a fight from him. He admires and relies upon her energy. She admires and relies upon his caution. Neither say so. She has engaged a contractor to provide estimates for carrying out the work, but he's proving to be an unpromising prospect and has yet to even visit the site.

You English, Finn,..

Yes,.. I know!

She's also aware Finn is yet to commit anything to the future, notes he is in no more hurry to move things on than the contractor. Meanwhile the weeds on the site thicken and the summer deepens. Soon it will be autumn. Moving in with her, trusting in her would be a sign of his absolute commitment to the project - both the business and the personal. And she needs that from him, needs it now. But as a prerequisite to him moving in, what she needs is commitment of a different and altogether more basic kind. In short there remains the question of that delicate matter between them.

Hermione had told her of her first attempt at seducing him, how Finn had fled from it, telling her it could never mean nothing to him, yet could never mean the world either because of the baggage he was carrying. Helena was relying on that still to be true, needed to know to what extent he was still carrying the bags, both the real and the imaginary, and to what degree she and Hermione had released him,...

And did he really want to be free anyway?

Even though he was free,

And with permissions.

Absolute!

"So, darlin',... you passin' through?"

"Hmm?"

The cafe is empty but for Finn, and the silence grates upon her. That's the thing with running a cafe, always someone to talk to and it feels wrong when there's not. He looks lost, like a man far from home, and she takes pity on him.

"Staying over for a bit," he says. "It's a nice looking town."

She laughs. "You think?"

"Seen a lot worse. You from round here?"

"Ballyshannon. That's down the road a bit. Bundoran's seen better days, like a lot of places in the west, but it's still lively enough. You here on your own?"

"Em,... meeting a,... a friend actually."

"Ah,... good for you!"

The kiss, yes,.. the kiss. And then what was it she said?

"Sorry for bed, but truly you don't know I am in it. I will have words with Hermione - she said it was twin room."

"Yea right, the bridal suite?"

"Well,... we both know she can be naughty girl. But important thing is dinner!" Her eyes light up in the hope of distracting him from their upcoming nuptials - the ones she has promised him do not exist.

You can never win with me, Finn. I am more complicated than you. Trust me on this.

Oh, I do.

"Dinner?"

"Yes, I am reading menu earlier. There is silver service, and eight course! I have very special dress, and you? You will wear tie?"

Is he up to it? Can he handle this much ambiguity?

A man like Finn!

"Em,.. I brought a tie but,.."

"You will wear tie. I like that you wear tie."

"Okay. I will wear tie."

"You smile? You suffer my bossiness?"

"I don't suffer it. I love it. You know I do."

"Oh, Finn, darling you make me so happy."

Her name is Moira. It says so on the little badge. She pours herself a glass of water, sits down with him. "You look like you've a story to tell," she says. "And I'm short of gossip. So tell me."

He laughs. "Me? A story?" Thinks a while. The energy of the sea is exhilarating. He's a mind to sit and watch it all afternoon. "Well," he says. "Maybe it's that I recently found something out about love. And I wasn't expecting it."

"Oh? I thought so. Man crossed in love. It's in your eyes. You have lonely eyes, darlin'."

"No, it's not that. It's more complicated, but simpler at the same time."

"Okay, so you say. But I'm confused already. Go on, tell me. What is it you think you know that no one else knows?"

Moira is a playful, puckish spirit, warms to most people, and Finn warms to her.

"Love," he says. "Romantic love, you know,... sex (sorry) and romance and all that other stuff on the telly,... and the way we're brought up to believe in it,... it's,... all just bullshit. You know?"

She at him with pity. "Only just worked that one out, have you?" But he knows she does not know what he means, not really. And it's nothing Carina has told him either, nothing about the many ways of loving. Like he said it's all much simpler than that. It's just that its simplicity makes it all but impossible to see, even when it's under your nose, let alone believe in and most of all, finally,...

Attain.

Dinner had delighted Helena, every detail savoured - the table setting, the menus, the chit-chat, the curious dishes, the occasional comment made over-loud for the benefit of other diners, even the posturing of her wrist with the old watch he'd given her.

Had he been the guy in the corner, with his wife, the guy whose eyes Helena had a magnetic effect upon, Finn would be thinking she was a shallow beauty perhaps, all show and glitter but well worth shagging all the same. It was a measure of his privilege, he supposed, she'd allowed him close enough to know differently, to know the mad, storm tossed depths in her, to know the proudness, the dignity, and the reasons why, and that to enter a woman like Helena would bring with it also a grave responsibility.

Another customer comes in and Moira leaves him to his coffee.

Just a week ago, that night,...

With Helena.

They're in the room again, late, a little over-relaxed from the wine. The curtains are drawn, Helena in her dress, turning now as she asks him to unzip her, both comfortable in a casual intimacy perhaps learned from other marriages. So he unzips her, gingerly, the zipper held away from the heat of her body. It slides effortlessly, her hands crossed over her bosom, fingertips pressed to her shoulders holding the dress in place. He imagines she will take pyjamas into the bathroom now and emerge chaste, ready for bed,...

She lets the dress fall.

He sees lilac underwear.

Hermione's?

Pale skin.

He sees the scar. *Fuck!*

"Oh,.. Helena!"

She stands a while, feels his eyes upon her back, invites his touch, draws breath when at last he finds the courage.

"Sorry, hands cold?"

"No Finn. It's all right that you touch me, you know? You have, of course, full permissions."

He ignores the reminder. "I'm so sorry."

"Is not so bad as that, surely? "

"No,... it's,.. just imagining what you must have gone through. What you're still going through."

"Oh? You become morose. This is not my intention. So, we forget it now." She turns to face him, beams encouragement. "Do you remember how to relieve a woman of her underwear?"

"Em,…"

"Of course you do. Hermione reminds you plenty times by now. So, you will show me what you remember, show me what she teaches you?"

"Helena,... I,..."

"Finn, darling, you do know is big lie, I mean that it is big bed and you do not know I am in it,... blah, blah, blah. You will know this soon enough,... if you want to."

He sweats of a sudden, demurs, feels the wine has disarmed him. She has seen to it he's drunk more than her, though suspects she should not be drinking at all while taking those pain-killers. "Well,.. it is a big bed," he says. "Do they call it double king-size?"

Helena refuses to bite, reminds herself it is he upon the hook, that she is reeling him in. "Listen, I do not have period, not for years. And pain

in back is not so bad I cannot bear it, though I regret I had better not be spending any time on top. You will forgive me for this?"

"For the lie, or that you'll not be spending any time on top?" Finn hopes to distract her with a joke.

She smiles at him patiently.

"All right," he says. "I know it was a lie. I know how the two of you work together now. And I'm not stupid."

"Yet still you came?"

"I didn't want to,... disappoint you. Either of you."

Ah,... a good sign, the best sign of them all! He didn't want to disappoint, she thinks, but he's still hoping to avoid any firm commitment,... elusive until the very end. Did he really think they'd be sleeping together and merely,... well, sleeping? It seems Finn is capable of persuading himself of any reality he likes.

It's a useful trick.

"Tonight is *our* night, Finn. Are you ready?"

She does not wait for an answer, unhooks the bra, shimmies her pants down, then reaches out confidently to pinch him firm through his trousers, communicating her want in entirely unambiguous terms. He doesn't flinch, closes his eyes as he swells deliciously into her grip.

She side-slips him a lascivious smile. "Hmm, is not morning this time. You want we do something about that?"

Yes, dammit,... he wants.

But he also knows lying with Helena will be like jumping into the void, and he'll have to accept the knowledge that nothing will ever be the same afterwards, that he'll have no idea what that might entail, only that he'll be firmly up to his neck in it, and for the rest of his life. She draws back the covers with a quiet and determined precision, revealing a neat triangle of cool Egyptian cotton, then slides in with her practised grace and pats the other side of the bed, inviting him.

"You come, now?" She winks saucily, teasing, then laughs at her own

joke. "I promise, darling, you come big time."

The door bell jingles, Finn looks up.

"Nina!"

"Hi ya, Finn. But you had better call me Nadia, like it says on my passport. In UK I was Nina, but Nina is no more. In Bundoran I am finally myself. I am Nadia."

She has already explained to him how 'Nadia' in old Polish means 'Free'

"So," he says. "How'd it go?"

Nina/Nadia is a changed woman, smart-suited, bright, powerful, smiling. She clasps his hand, kisses him excitedly. "Job is mine. Start tomorrow. Is very nice hotel, very respectable,... money is respectable also. All of this surprises me. I make good start here, I think, and about time too. There is possibility of promotion to management."

"That's good. But more important, you'll be safe."

"This is definitely not UK?"

"No. UK's across the border. This is the Irish Republic. Europe. And that's official. Nobody will be looking to kick you out or burn your house down."

She laughs. "Then we both escape BREXIT?"

"Ha,.. tempting."

They had become good friends on the drive over, also during the weeks he had been visiting her at Lionel's house. It had come as a surprise to learn of Helena's 'phone call to her husband, a surprise the man owned hotels in Poland, France,... Italy,.. *Ireland.*

That they were always on the lookout for staff.

In Ireland,...

Do you see it, Finn?

"It is good your girlfriend lets you drive me here."

"Em,.. no bother. She insisted, actually." Finn is still puzzled by that.

"Hmm,... but I'm curious, which one of those two ladies is your girlfriend, exactly, Mr Finn?"

She smiles, teasing. Finn does not answer, asks about the job instead. Nadia is happy with the arrangement and she'll work hard, she tells him. She'll make something of herself. Finn knows she will. Her energy is infectious, also her courage and he worries he has already spent too long behind spreadsheets, too long thinking things through, over and over, to ever be so brave as she.

"I have made friends already. There is Lina from Krakow, and Zofia from Gdansk. They take me out tonight. You will come? I would like to,.. introduce you."

"What, as your dad?"

"Ha, you are funny. But I am clearly much older than you think."

"Well,... to be honest I'm all done in, Nina,... I mean Nadia,... You enjoy yourself, but take care. You know where I am if you need me."

She makes doe eyes at him, strokes the back of his hand. "Oh, please, Finn. After everything that has happened, after such a daring escape back across that border into Europe, I would very much like to get drunk with you in celebration."

He thinks about it, him out on the town in the west of Ireland, having a laugh and getting drunk with a bunch of Polish women he doesn't know. It's the most unlikely thing he's ever heard. Apart from all the other things recently.

What is normal about times we live in, Finn?

"Go on then." he says.

He thinks of her then,... not Nadia,... Helena.

Helena of the clouds.

Helena in bed.

She's proud, quite still, almost, dare he say submissive, as he crosses the boundary into that smoothness and heat, She is entirely accepting of him, a hand on his shoulder the only guide. And the eyes, big, searching, seeking out the truth in him, of the kind of man he truly is when he comes shuddering quick into the exquisite silkiness of her deepest self - but above all if he can possibly be the kind of man she needs him most to be.

He'll do.

He's disappointed she does not come so hard nor quick as he, does not come at all perhaps. But then some things are too sacred to fake, and there must always be honesty between them at some level. She pauses him in his persistence, accepts him to her breast, and then he sleeps.

She leaves him be for now, will try him later, rested.

Then he'll have a lot to think about.

Chapter Ninety seven

"So,... how was it?"

"Hmm? How was what darling?"

Hermione and Helena are seated upon a blanket in the dunes. The evening is warm, clear, turning to pink and amber. They have walked arm in arm a short way from the house, about as far as Helena can manage now and still pretend everything is okay. They are watching Kyle and Anica playing with a Frisbee far out on the edge of the sea. Kyle is muscular, quick, Anica impossibly thin, light as air, lithe as a gazelle. Their laughter softens the harsh cry of the gulls, carries in sweetly on the breeze, a gentle, pleasing music.

Both agree they are beautiful together.

"Oh, come on. You know what I mean. It's weeks now, and you've bin ever so coy about it. Got me worried. I mean it *did*,... 'appen,... *dint* it? Dint go to all that trouble settin' you up for nothin'?"

Helena nods, firm, a smile breaking through at the memory. "He was sweet, Hermione. And ever so gentle." Her eyes are suddenly a little tearful.

Hermione pretends not to see, senses the fear in her. *It hadn't gone well? She'd been too demanding? She'd frightened him to death? They'll never see him again?*

Helena wipes her eyes with the backs of her hands, shakes the feeling away, sits a little more upright, restores dignity, laughs. "But you are right - he is strictly one shot. Maybe two if coaxed." She blushes. "Which I did of course. Coax, I mean. First thing in morning. He wakes to find me on top, though I have already lied and tell him I cannot, and he is so excited I fear he will die of a heart attack. You have tried that with him?"

"Oh,... all the time. He loves it."

Hermione waits for the pang of jealousy at Helena's blistering candour, awaits the burn of colour to her cheeks but there is none. Instead, she craves the touch, alarming in its intensity - Helena's, Finn's,... it doesn't matter.

"So, he was gentle was he?... presume that was on account of your bad back?"

Helena makes further light of it: "Not entirely, I hope. But this is not to say I approve of mere animal couplings."

"Could have fooled me."

Helena taps Hermione's arm in mild rebuke.

"Ow! So,... and?"

"And what?"
"Oh,... you're impossible."

"Sorry for tease,... truth is I love him this way. It is great pleasure to share him with you. As for Finn, he knows how I feel. He knows how you feel. So, between us we open the door to him."

"Yea, and then he buggers off to Ireland. So, you heard anythin' from 'im yet?"

Helena shakes her head, sifts sand between her fingers. How many grains in one palm, she wonders? and she, Hermione and Finn but three of them. "We must not seem too,... needy, darling. Finn is slippery fish and we must play him cleverly, between us."

"Hate it when you talk like that."

"Like what?"

"So,... I dunno,... Pragmatic."

"I can be Romantic too. But Romantic is for fantasy, for play-acting. Pragmatic is for real, like future. We secure one, then have luxury of pretending other. Everyone is happy."

"So you say. But he better come back, that's all. He said anything to you 'bout selling his house down south?"

Helena demurs. "He will." Though she wonders, and cannot say for sure. And Hermione is right, he'd better come back because Helena, determined as she is, is in no fit state to go running after him.

Fast girl come fetch you Finn!

Hermione is desperate for news. "He will? Which? Say or sell?"

"Both. You are losing faith in him, darling?"

"Just scared - wish he'd text or somethin'."

Helena smiles, hides the immensity of her relief, then motions with her eyes to the beach, to a lone figure strolling out to the youngsters. Hermione grips Helena's hand tight, momentarily cuts off the blood to her fingers.

"Finn!"

He joins in their game - Kyle and Anica. They are beaming and dancing to see him, switch seamlessly to pig in the middle. Finn is 'pig', and they have him darting after a pink Frisbee. He's out of breath in no time and his knees hurt. He feels old and tired but happy to be home, wonders at the fuss.

Did they think he wasn't coming back?

They watch for a while, Helena and Hermione, then Helena says: "You better go rescue him."

"Suppose so. Don't want 'em wearin' him out for later, eh?"

"Later?"

Hermione rolls her eyes. "Don't suppose you fancy?..."

Helena assumes a patient expression. "Don't be disgusting, darling."

Hermione gives her father's watch a wind, then jogs away. Helena anticipates their reunion. He's not been away a week but it feels much longer. She anticipates the hot bear-hug Hermione will deliver him, wonders if she will ever be able to run like that, bounce like that. She decides she has not the guts for it, even if the great British National Health Service can remove the leftovers from her body of a former life, one that is still trying ever so doggedly to catch up with her.

It should be only a few weeks now, the operation that will either ruin her or release her, except the letter came that morning postponing

things until the New Year. She'll leave it a while before telling Finn - tell Hermione first, perhaps. She'll break it to him better. He'll be upset for her, but there's nothing to be done, and she's in no hurry to gambol with a life when life is, in so many other ways, looking up.

Hermione has delivered the hug now, leaping at him, smothering him in kisses. The youngsters pretend to be embarrassed, make faces. Hermione does not care. They turn, walk back towards Helena, hand in hand. Hermione points to Helena, waiting in the dunes. They wave and she feels lifted, gasping at the rush, feels for a moment almost,...

Romantic.

It's been such a long road at times, and dark, and cold, and the promise of nothing much at the end of it - just this lonely old house atop shaggy dunes, by the filthiest sea in Europe. But now she finds it impossible not to be at least a little optimistic, provided of course one does not think much further than tomorrow. Because beyond tomorrow darker times are coming, and she wonders if they are prepared for it. Finn, with his business head, must have some inkling of the way it will be. He must know too, the only way to avoid the unexpected is to be unexpected yourself, that survival is availing oneself of the opportunities, or creating them as you go along.

And money helps.

God help you in these times if you have no money.

Sure, a happy ending might yet be plucked from adversity, but it is no longer the simple solution that makes most sense. The world is far too complicated for that. To simplify it is to engage with it dishonestly, and reap the whirlwind as a consequence.

Finn sits upon the blanket beside her and she welcomes him back with a peck to the cheek, then sinks her head, snug, to his shoulder. Hermione kneels with them, pulls a Thermos from the basket, twists off the top, pours. She hands him the cup, and he drinks.

Tea.

Earl Grey, twist of lemon and a little honey.

He pauses while the unfamiliar flavour lights up his palate. She gives him a knowing smile and a wink, and he swallows.

Goodbye Mr Americano.

Welcome home, darlin'.